The trade unions agenda and involvement in Occupational and Environmental Health at workplaces, South Africa

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Abstract

A trade union is a workers' organization that advocates and protects the interests of its members on matters such as working conditions. The three main categories in the definition of environmental health (physical, biological, and chemical) establish working conditions in the workplace that have a direct impact on human health. Understanding the concepts of occupational hygiene (recognition, identification, evaluation, and control) enables agenda formulation and trade union involvement in maintaining the sustainability of environmental and occupational health in respective workplaces. In the context of Marxism economic analysis, a capitalist society existed and divided into two classes: the bourgeoisie (business owners), who owned and controlled the means of production, and the proletariat (workers), whose labor converted raw commodities into marketable goods. The proletariat does not own the means of production and has little power in the capitalist economic system, despite being paid the lowest possible wages and easily replaceable in times of high devaluing perceived worth due to health effects and ill health, as business owners had to get the most possible work out of their laborers in order to maximize profits. Workers' health and safety were not prioritized in this situation. Marx, on the other hand, predicted that employees would become dissatisfied with their jobs and resentful of company owners. This revolution would be headed by enlightened leaders known as "the vanguard of the proletariat," who understood the class struggle and would unite the working class via increased awareness and class consciousness. According to the Labour Relations Act of 1995, these leaders referred as trade unions. This paper discusses trade unions involvement and contribution to the sustainability of Environmental and Occupational Health at workplaces through agenda setting of influence or determination of a program of action through negotiations, participation, and engagements with employers, employees, and stakeholders such as labor inspectors.