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## From Latin America/ Chile

### Uniting for health and safety

*Unions in fish processing plants in Chile need to take up issues of health and safety as a priority*

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The Xth Region of our country, Chile, is one of the most important fishing zones, both in terms of volumes of fish produced (particularly farmed salmon) and in the variety of shellfish (molluscs and crustaceans) processed for human consumption—fresh, frozen and canned. Production is mainly export-oriented, destined for markets in USA, Japan and Europe.

In this region, there are around 150 processing units varying in size and investment profile—transnational, national, foreign and joint-venture. A significant number of them—about 100—employ women in labour-intensive jobs, in handling, cleaning and packing. Recently, we undertook a study of 23 fish plants, to draw attention to health and hygiene conditions of the work done by women. We found that workers are exposed to a range of hazards—the constant exposure to cold and dampness, having to stand for the entire working day of eight and more hours, the manual handling of loads (trays of raw material), repetitive and monotonous production line work—that need to be addressed if negative impacts on the health of workers are to be avoided. These conditions, essentially inherent in the performance of these jobs, frequently cause different complaints and ailments (lumbago, tendonitis, chronic colds, etc.).

The presence of workers aware of these issues is a key factor in hazard management. But in the entire region we could only find 40 unions in 150 plants. 20 of these are part of a union called the Federation of Fishing Industry Workers of the Xth Region, the President of which is a woman. This organisation has demanded that the employment authorities formulate a safety policy to address the lack of information about health and safety as well as all the other working conditions that act as aggravating factors.

The position of unions in the region is complex. The overall rate of unionisation is over one per cent lower than the national level—14.86 per cent, as against

16.19 per cent—and those affiliated to unions (33,181 workers) represent only five per cent of the unionised workers nationally (613,123). Legally, committees for health and safety, and joint committees for risk prevention are required in every establishment employing more than 25 workers. However, even where they have been formally set up they do not always work in practice or in a satisfactory manner, for various reasons. That is to say, they merely comply with the functions required by law: supervision, training, checking, etc.

It is possible that the preponderance of women workers in processing plants is the reason why there are low levels of organisation and why only moderate pressure is applied for compliance with the norms for preventive measures. Different studies have shown that women tend to be more absent from the proactive processes of prevention, often due to their particular situations, such as their dual responsibilities (for domestic work, childcare, etc.), which makes their involvement impossible. But it is also true that both women and men workers are made to feel that the issues of health and safety are too technical, and that to understand them requires expertise. What is certain is that despite the need for training, those with the appropriate technical capacity are hardly aware of the impact of the work on the health of women.

It would appear that there is a considerable challenge for unions to take up the issues of health and safety as a priority (at times hampered by earnings and job stability) and to involve the workers and their concerns about health and safety as a matter of union procedure, and in the joint committees. Both of these areas require coordinated action. The Federation has proposed such an initiative, which must develop concrete and proven measures, if the quality of life and work of the fishery workers is to be improved.