

## [Workers' rights | ISHR launches bilingual explainer on rights of workers exposed to toxic substances](#)

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To recognise International Labour Day, and the critical contributions of essential workers everywhere, ISHR is publishing a guide in English and Chinese to the 15 Principles developed by the UN expert on human rights and hazardous substances. These aim to empower workers to know their rights, protect their health, and stand up to employers and governments who fall short or fail to provide remedy.



**ISHR's English-Chinese bilingual explainer can be downloaded here:**

English: [generic version](#) or [China-tailored version](#)

Chinese: [generic version](#) or [China-tailored version](#)

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Workers' rights are human rights. Sustaining our public services, building our infrastructure, or producing our food and medicine, workers are a driving force of our societies. They are entitled to decent working conditions, and a safe and healthy workplace. To protect those rights, they must be free to speak out, assemble, form trade unions, and bargain collectively.

Workers' rights are a global issue. In every economic sector worldwide, the health and life of millions of workers exposed to hazardous substances, and of their families and communities, are at great risk. From the use of chemicals in the electronics industry without appropriate risk-assessments, to inhalation of toxic dusts in the construction and mining sectors without appropriate equipment: these and similar situations result in widespread occupational diseases that [take away one worker's life every 30 seconds](#).

Women, children, migrants, workers with disabilities, and those working in the informal and high-risk sectors are particularly vulnerable. In the meantime, as States and powerful companies increasingly outsource their dangerous and dirty work, often to the Global South, workers' rights and companies' obligations get lost in opaque transnational supply chains.

For 25 years, the UN has mandated a [Special Rapporteur](#) to look specifically into the human rights implications of exposure to hazardous substances and wastes. In September 2019, the current independent expert, [Baskut Tuncak](#), presented a set of [15 key principles](#) compiling existing international standards and obligations, with a view to end the exploitation of workers through their exposure to toxic substances. These principles have been endorsed by a [resolution](#) from the UN Human Rights Council.

These principles are designed to help States and companies to meet their obligations, including overseas, to **respect, protect, and fulfill** the rights of workers, and to prevent their exposure to toxic substances. They aim at **empowering workers** to know and exercise their individual and collective rights to information, participation and assembly, and to access effective remedies for them and their communities.

**China** continues to be ‘the world’s factory’, a fact made ever more apparent during the current response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The shocks to the market have shown how interconnected we all are, and how many supply chains make their way through China on their way to our shops and our homes. However, transparency in supply chains and respect for the full range of workers’ rights remain huge problems in the country. Since 2018, authorities have received several requests from UN experts about their labour protection record. But instead of responding meaningfully and taking steps to address concerns, the Chinese authorities have [punished workers and civil society groups](#) for advocating on rights issues, including occupational safety and health.

**To support workers and their allies, ISHR has [produced an explainer in English and Chinese](#)** summarising these 15 Principles; highlighting the role of governments, companies, and trade unions; and providing workers with a set of actionable recommendations to implement them. **For Chinese advocates, [ISHR has produced a ‘tailored’ version](#)** that includes additional information about the UN expert’s inquiries into management of hazardous substances and workers’ rights situation in China, as well as a table to help workers, trade union officials and advocates understand how Chinese law currently reflects these principles.

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