

ADDRESS BY MARY ANN FORBES, East African Regional Representative, Solidarity Center, AFL-CIO

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Finally, on behalf of the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center and trade union women let me say that we are very pleased with the UNEP initiative and efforts to reach out and include trade unions in your important work.

American unions have taken occupational safety and health and environment issues very seriously for a long time. Look at what we are watching on the news now with the mineworkers accident in West Virginia. The last young man is barely alive because of lack of oxygen. Air Quality is just one important OSH problem confronted by many workers.

If you flew to this conference on a plane that banned smoking, that is a direct result of intelligent competent networking and lobbying for improved Air Quality by the women trade unionists at the Association of Flight Attendants in the US whose members used to suffer from skin disease and lethal lung disease because of their work environment.

Globally, the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center follows up on these environmental concerns, but resources are extremely scarce. We are working with trade union women who are exposed to toxic substances at work, whether in the agricultural trades or the EPZs. I met a young muslim girl, a garment worker in the EPZs here, who was forced to work on her hands and knees with a toxic substance for over a week in a confined space because she refused to have sex with her employer. When she became ill with a lung disorder she was fired for not coming to work. This is a country with 56% unemployment. That job was all she had to barely survive.

African women workers need special attention because of their extreme vulnerability due to lack of resources. I am not talking just about access to resources, I am talking about the power to control resources. Trade unions attempt to balance that access to power and give women a voice in their environments. We are working on issues around Trafficking in Persons, Violence, Sexual Harassment and Rape or even murder of women. Why do these things happen? Why are poor women forced to sell their small babies or young daughters for body parts, sex trades or servitude...which is virtual slavery? They are forced to do these horrendous things to their children and daughters because they cannot care for them. They don't have control over their resources and they are denied adequate pay and protections for their hard work.

One hope these women workers have is that by working together they can form a trade union to protect themselves and improve conditions in their communities and on the job. Three years ago 30,000 women in the EPZs here shut down their factories and took to the streets to protest against their inhumane treatment. Today, thanks to the support of the ICFTU, ITG, and especially COTU, these young women formed their first trade union and signed their first collective bargaining agreement. This could not have happened without global intervention, and the tripartite cooperation of the Federation of Kenya Employers and the Kenyan government. These young activist women became shop stewards and I asked them if their lives had changed after they had signed a union agreement. They said the abuses they experienced in the past could not happen now. A trade union helps to balance control of resources and create an opportunity to dialogue about occupational and environmental issues.

Now they have a structure in place, these young women need expertise in workplace health and safety so they can address other serious occupational diseases and environmental conditions. But they don't have the resources to do that. They need our support and access to our networks.

I don't have enough time now, but I want you to think about two things when you drive to the airport to head home after this conference. First, on the way to the airport you will see the sign for the Athi River EPZ. Please think of these amazing young women trade unionists and

all of the challenges they are facing trying to protect themselves and their friends at work.

Also, when you get on your plane, thank women trade unionists at the Association of Flight Attendants for the very air you are breathing. If it's a bit improved, it's a direct result of their efforts.

Women trade unionists can and do make a tremendous impact on the world. We need to continue to support them. And I thank UNEP, the ILO and the ICFTU for this important initiative.

Thank you.