

Brussels, 15 July 2022

Submission from the Workers and Trade Unions Major Group on the first the intergovernmental negotiating committee on plastic pollution (INC-1)

The impacts of plastic production and pollution on the triple planetary crisis of climate change, nature loss and contamination are a major planetary catastrophe that concerns everyone, anywhere. Exposure to plastics is harming human health, and potentially affecting fertility, hormonal, metabolic and neurological activity, while open burning of plastics – a result of the overwhelming burden plastic waste is placing on already fragile national and local waste management systems - contributes to air pollution, which kills 4.2 million people every year according to the WHO.¹ Plastic pollution of the land and water greatly impacts the sustainability of agriculture, livestock, aquaculture and fisheries; it represents a threat to the food security of the world population. It also destroys resort areas and destroys sustainable tourism opportunities. Microplastics found in human cells, lungs and placentas, as well as in water and seafood have been linked to cell death, with mid- and long-term health, environmental and food chain implications that are currently uncertain.² Plastic waste – including medical waste - has been exponentially increased by Covid-19 related measures, that encouraged the use of masks, gloves, syringes, personal protective equipment etc.³ as well as the consumption of ready-meals and home deliveries during lockdown.⁴

The aim of the international legally binding agreement to end plastic pollution should be to support the development of sustainable economies, consumption and food systems in both under an environmental and social dimension.

The Workers and Trade Union (WTU) Major Group insists that ambitious, adequate and quickly actionable measures must be urgently negotiated to put a halt to plastic pollution by preventing its harmful use and improper disposal and to implement urgent measures to mitigate and remedy the harm already done to the environment and public health, that are humanity's common goods.

The WTU Major Group also stresses that for such an international binding agreement

¹ WHO, Air pollution, https://www.who.int/health-topics/air-pollution#tab=tab_1

² Carrington, D, "Microplastics cause damage to human cells, study shows" The Guardian 8 December 2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/dec/08/microplastics-damage-human-cells-study-plastic>

³ Clinical waste collectors – unprotected, untrained, underpaid and undervalued, Equal Times ITUC 2021

⁴ Sanitation workers play a key role to break the contamination chain, PSI 2020

to be legitimate and effective, the process must ensure the meaningful participation in the negotiations of representatives of all workers involved in the plastics value chain and life cycle - from production to disposal – regardless of their employment status, be it formal or informal, permanent or precarious, waged or self-employed, public or private.

Only such approach will open the door to a Just Transition towards a sustainable society that can end the global scourge of plastic pollution, offset its huge collective environmental and social costs, and put adequate resources and labour at the service of preserving human health and protecting the planet. The global trade union movement proposes the following definition, adapted to the context of the negotiations for the plastic treaty:

A just transition secures the future and livelihoods of workers and their communities in the transition to end plastic pollution. It is based on social dialogue between workers and their unions, employers and governments. A plan for just transition provides and guarantees better and decent jobs, social protection, more training opportunities and greater job security for all workers affected by plastic pollution and the proposed measures to end plastic pollution.

The ILO ‘Guidelines for a just transition towards environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all’ are both a policy framework (covering nine mutually reinforcing policy areas) and a practical tool to help countries at all levels of development manage the transition to environmentally sustainable economies.⁵

We recommend that negotiators convene at the onset of and only during INC-1 to specify the objectives of the new instrument, codify definitions and plan the programme of work.⁶ Without clear objectives, the INC will be inhibited from the outset through a lack of a commonly agreed direction.

Such objectives need to be clear and set ambitious goals, including:

- *‘to eliminate plastic pollution in all environments’*
- *‘to reduce the overall amount of plastic produced and used’,*
- *‘to achieve full circularity for all remaining plastics in a manner that is protective of human health and of the environment’*
- *‘to ensure adequate public investment – both in infrastructure and staff - in modern, integrated waste management systems in regions, cities and territories to put an end to unsafe plastic landfill practices, as well as to open air and illegal dump plastic waste’.*
- *‘to clean up existing plastic pollution on land and water ensuring that the burden of the cost of the clean-up is duly reflective of polluter duties and responsibilities’*
- *‘to boost scientific research to inform action to minimize and treat the harm already caused to public health and the environment and its mid- and long-*

⁵ https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/green-jobs/publications/WCMS_432859/lang--en/index.htm

⁶ We support the submission by the Environmental Investigation Agency and Center For International Environmental Law on the Sequencing of Work of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee

term implications'

- and *'to endorse the precautionary principle and proper impact assessment mechanisms as a baseline in the introduction of new, plastic-based products in the environment'*

Besides, the WTU Major Group requires the inclusion of the objective

- *'to respect and promote the fundamental human and labour right to a safe and healthy working environment for all workers in the plastics value chain and life cycle.'*⁷

The WTU Major Group also wants to provide input on *"the content and considerations for the preparation of the forum as set out in the OEWG information document entitled 'Preparations for the forum'"*:

- The Workers and Trade Union major group supports the organisation of the Forum at the start of INC-1. The Forum should clarify its methodology to gather perspectives from legitimate, relevant right holders and stakeholders across the plastics value chain and life cycle in a way that must be balanced and democratic. Workers in all parts of the value chain and life cycle are direct right holders as well as affected stakeholders and their voice, expertise and views should be meaningfully included all along from the onset of the negotiation process.
- A legitimate, balanced and equal representation of relevant right holders and stakeholders must be guaranteed at the Forum and in all stages of the negotiations. There should be an explicit recognition of the fact that some actors in the plastics supply chain have more means to participate and follow the international negotiations than other actors such as the organisations representing the workers and other right holders. Besides, it is fundamental that the vested interest agenda of stakeholders that have a profit motive in plastics production and use be clearly identified as opposed to those who seek to advance this international agreement in common interest with regard to plastic pollution. Recognising and effectively dealing with these imbalances, contradictions and vested agendas is an important factor that will enable a successful outcome of the negotiations and the development of an effective international instrument.
- Over 60 percent of the world population lives in cities and urban centres⁸ producing the bulk of plastic debris. Among governments, it is local authorities that overwhelmingly have to deal with the concrete consequences of the health and environmental burden of plastic pollution. In developing countries especially, where municipal fiscal systems are and intergovernmental transfers do not always adequately follow devolution mandates, the cost of

⁷ For more information see the recent landmark decision at the International Labour Conference to add safety and health to the Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work: https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_848132/lang--en/index.htm

⁸ UN Habitat, World Cities Report 2022, <https://unhabitat.org/wcr>

waste services often represents the largest share of municipal budgets. It is therefore essential to include local authorities in the negotiations and to ensure public policy coordination and coherence among different levels of governments, reconciling the responsibilities of different agencies (environment, health, public space management, labour, finance, etc.) in the development and implementation of relevant public policies.

- Workers are at the forefront of plastic production, use, disposal, collection, sorting, reuse, recycling and disposal. The concept of 'just transition' provides a powerful tool to engage affected workers, their families and communities in the policy work to end plastic pollution and re-orient their work towards a green, decarbonised and sustainable world. While just transition is mostly discussed in the climate debate, due to its recognition in the Paris Agreement, it should also be applied in other environmental policy areas.
- The WTU Major Group stresses that it is crucial that workers have a seat at the table, that their voice is properly heard and that their representative organisations be meaningfully involved from all stages of the plastics value chain and life cycle. The following stages and their representative workers' organisations must be included:
 - Petrochemical sector covering fossil fuel extraction, plastic production and recycling: Industrial Global Union (<https://www.industrialunion.org/>)
 - The food and farming sector which includes workers affected by plastic pollution in agriculture, fishing and the tourism industry: International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF, <https://www.iuf.org/>)
 - Public services workers providing waste collection, sorting, recycling and disposal as well as ancillary services such as road cleaning, street sweeping and public & green space maintenance. Hospital and medical waste disposal workers as well as water and sanitation workers; green space, park rangers and forest guards, public emergency workers, who deal with the consequences of plastic and microplastic waste in water and in the environment. These workers often provide such services with inadequate staffing levels, in extremely poor, dangerous and unhealthy conditions, and lack of adequate working tools, personal protective equipment and training. Public Services International Global Union (PSI, <https://publicservices.international/>)
 - Waste pickers in the informal sector providing important services in the waste phase of the value chain, very often in poor, dangerous and unhealthy conditions: Global Alliance of Waste Pickers (<https://globalrec.org/>)

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