



European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)  
Confédération européenne des syndicats (CES)

## Perspectives for a new European Health and Safety strategy (2013-2020)

Resolution adopted at the Executive Committee on 7-8 December 2011

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Each year, around 160,000 people die in the European Union as a result of illness or accidents caused by working conditions. As the current EU occupational health and safety strategy is due to end in 2012, the Commission would normally be preparing its strategy on occupational health and safety for the period 2013-20. It is therefore deeply concerning that the new strategy has been postponed by the Commission. As a central pillar of the social acquis, this cannot be accepted by the trade union movement.

A strong European health and safety strategy is needed as urgently as ever. In the context of the crisis, our own research, as well as recent evidence from the European Foundation (Eurofound) in Dublin and the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work in Bilbao, demonstrates the increasing rates of health and safety risks at work linked to work intensity and insecurity. Tackling prevention and risk management better, while promoting worker involvement through safety representatives, are key to reducing the economic costs and social consequences of accidents at work and occupational illnesses. This is a fundamental element of a 'good jobs' agenda at European level, and should be linked to the employment package due in March 2012 as a signal of the Commission's commitment to quality job creation and development.

The European Union and all of its institutions must uphold and promote fundamental social rights, including the right of every worker to "working conditions which respect his or her health, safety and dignity" (Article 31(1) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union). From this viewpoint, the European Commission and the other European institutions have a duty to improve working conditions.

Active ageing requires an ambitious and strong health and safety agenda – it is therefore all the more appropriate that the new health and safety strategy should be published in the European Year of Active Ageing (2012).

The gulf in terms of working conditions between the different European Union countries is not getting any smaller, while within individual countries, that gulf increases the higher the position held in the social hierarchy. Some 59% of workers within the European Union say that they will be able to continue to do the same work by the time they reach the age of 60. This proportion drops to 44% for the least qualified blue collar workers. Between 2000 and 2010, the gap between these two categories rose from 21% to 27%. The segregation that characterises many professions and business sectors has led to significant differences between men and women in terms of their working conditions and the impact of the latter on their health.

The ETUC intends to use this resolution to highlight the issues that it sees as crucial to address in the forthcoming strategy, which we demand to see published in the course of 2012.

Our proposals focus on two aspects: 1) H&S structures must be improved in order to avoid knee-jerk reactions, and 2) priority must be given to improving H&S at work in general not only preventing accidents.

### **1. *Improving the structures of H&S systems***

Experience gathered in several countries has shown that it is helpful to adopt a strategy that combines health and safety representations within companies with regional or site representations for very small companies. The Community strategy should set the minimum targets that each national inspectorate should meet, indicating minimal quantitative objectives, such as a ratio of at least one OSH field inspector per 10,000 workers, a sufficient ratio of inspectors per 1,000 companies and a higher probability of inspection for all companies. Effective sanctions should be taken against employers not respecting their legal requirements. The next Community strategy must set the minimum targets to be met by multi-disciplinary, competent and independent workplace H&S services.

### **2. *Unions: a key player at all levels***

Unions through their activities have a key role to play in giving new impetus to the EU's health and safety policy. This activity rests on the promotion of the role of worker H&S representatives, increasing the visibility of workplace H&S problems, supporting the definition of collective priorities and mobilising workers to improve working conditions. The ETUC is calling for the introduction of a system to enable the representation of workers in all companies. Worker participation is key at all levels. Experience shows the benefit of an approach combining company-based representation with a regional or site approach to cover very small companies. Trade union health and safety policy is inseparable from industrial relations and collective bargaining systems as a whole. It must consider ways of better organising precarious workers, migrant workers, self-employed workers, and others often neglected by health and safety at work measures.

### **3. *Improving prevention of work-related illnesses***

It is in workplace health that the Community policy can provide the greatest added value, as it is this area that the current strategy has been less effective. ETUC priorities for the upcoming strategy are focused on three main areas: reducing exposure to hazardous substances and, specifically, preventing work-related cancers, preventing musculoskeletal disorders and improving mental health at work.

#### **3.1. *Using REACH to provide workers with enhanced protection against hazardous substances***

The primary cause of work-related death is exposure to hazardous substances. The ETUC insists on the vital synergy between the gradual implementation of REACH and the improvement of H&S in the workplace. A potential improvement of REACH must be exploited through a systematic strategy based on workplace H&S. REACH should provide more extensive information on chemical substances and the conditions for their use; encourage the substitution of those substances that are of the greatest concern; and, put in place mechanisms for companies that use chemical substances to provide feedback to manufacturers, thus increasing the opportunities for monitoring by public authorities. The ETUC has been involved in the activities of the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) in a bid to increase effectiveness, transparency and union participation these different areas.

It is unacceptable that the revision of the Directive on the protection of workers against carcinogenic agents has taken over ten years without any substantial results achieved. It is vital that the scope of the current directive be extended to include substances that are toxic for reproduction. The substitution of the most hazardous substances must be the first priority for effective prevention. When substitution is technically impossible, exposure should be reduced to minimal levels. Exposure limits must be stipulated for the main substances covered by the directive. A coherent European policy must be drafted on nanomaterials and endocrine disrupters.

### **3.2. *Making progress in the prevention of musculoskeletal disorders***

A framework directive on the prevention of musculoskeletal disorders is crucial to provide a common legislative basis for efforts to prevent these disorders – efforts which must be intensified. It should address all factors that contribute to musculoskeletal disorders and particularly work organisation and work intensity.

### **3.3. *Mental health: too often neglected***

The links between mental health and employment and working conditions are significant. Restructuring, unemployment, precarious employment and poor working conditions are behind major social inequalities from the point of view of mental health. All the surveys conducted on working conditions show that stress is a serious problem affecting an increasing number of workers. Besides, there is a significant link between working conditions and depression or burn-out. Monitoring workers' working conditions more closely is crucial to preventing mental health problems. Effective prevention must also address the unequal overall distribution of work between men and women, the lack of democracy in the workplace and the different factors behind discrimination, harassment and violence.

## **4. *The international dimension***

The process of improving working conditions within the European Union is not divorced from broader developments at international level. The ETUC is therefore calling for the conventions of the International Labour Organisation to be ratified and will shore up its cooperation with unions from other parts of the world. It also wishes to reassert its support of demands for a global ban on asbestos.

## **ETUC ACTION PLAN FOR 2012**

### *Trade union actions and initiatives*

1. The ETUC calls on affiliates to actively lobby their governments and MEPs through all means to press for the publication of the new OSH strategy.
2. The ETUC calls on its affiliates to organise activities on the 28<sup>th</sup> April 2012 and during the EU Health and Safety Week in 2012 in order to support the demands to “Expand workers' health and safety representation and enhance representatives' rights” and “boost the role and resources of labour inspectorates”. The ETUC will collect information from its affiliates and circulate this information in order to give a European dimension to the coming 28<sup>th</sup> April Worker Memorial Day.
3. The ETUC will organise an exchange of information with European trade union federations on the OSH priorities in order to explore the possibility of a stronger cooperation. A seminar on the role of sectoral social dialogue will be organised.

4. The ETUC will strengthen cooperation with the affiliated confederations in countries which are not members of the EU in order to identify common OSH priorities.
5. In cooperation with ETUI, the ETUC will strengthen the existing networks on chemicals and REACH implementation, and standardisation. In the field of standardisation, work on the impact of the standardisation of services will be strengthened with the European trade union federations.
6. The ETUC will work closely with the European Trade Union institute and launch initiatives to strengthen exchanges of experiences between trade unions and the various health and safety bodies as regards risks connected with organisation of work, like psychological and social factors. The ETUC will support cooperation between trade union organisations with a view to ensuring that European agreements on stress and violence actually result in tangible improvements.

### *EU legislation and policies*

The priorities of ETUC for 2012 are:

- a) the adoption of a new OSH strategy 2013-2020. The trade unions will work at European and national level to ensure that the new strategy sets concrete targets, tackles actual priorities and helps make a real improvement to health and safety.
- b) REACH: we aim to guarantee consistent implementation and make sure that the trade unions' views are heard during the REACH evaluation that is scheduled for 2012.
- c) the revision of the directive on carcinogens at work is a key factor in the synergy between REACH and OSH legislation
- d) the adoption of a directive on MSD
- e) the adoption of a regulation on standardisation
- f) the adoption of a comprehensive policy covering the various issues linked to asbestos, in terms of both worker protection and compensation for illnesses and protection of public health.

### *EU OSHA European Campaign 2012-13*

The ETUC considers the European Agency for Health and Safety at Work's European Campaign "Better Health and Safety through Prevention" (2012-2013) to be an important awareness-raising opportunity. It will be aimed at improvements in cooperation between both sides of industry on behalf of better working conditions and higher standards in health and safety. Worker participation on health and safety will be a central theme. The ETUC as a Campaign Partner will promote products co-developed by the Bilbao Agency as well as own products or products developed in cooperation with the ETUI.