



PRESS RELEASE

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Are HSCs working? Initial outputs of a ULB survey

Presented at a joint ETUC/ETUI-REHS* conference on “Workers' health and safety reps: a vital asset for preventive strategies”.

Is there any point to formal bodies for workers' health and safety representation? Yes, on many counts. Recent developments in Belgium have hammered home the message once again. Preventive strategies and occupational health and safety policies have to be put into practice and renewed without let-up in workplaces, because new products, new equipment, new machinery and new organisational constraints demand that constant attention be paid to these issues. Collecting data on the experiences of workers' reps' who sit on workplace health and safety committees (HSCs) is one way of getting insight into what is at stake in implementing preventive strategies in workplaces.

Cooperation between the three Belgian trade unions (CSC, FGTB, CGSLB), the European Trade Union Confederation's (ETUC) Research Institute, and the Free University of Brussels' (ULB) Center of Sociology of Work, Employment and Training enabled the first-ever national survey to be done among union rep members of HSCs.

Initial statistical processing was done on 592 usable questionnaires without regard to the respondent's branch of industry or the company size.

Selected results:

Respondent profiles: 21.1% have sat on the HSC since 2004 or later; 32.3% since 2000. This means they were elected in the last two rounds of workplace elections (2000, 2004). But some reps are very long-standing HSC members - 35% have been on it since 1996 or even earlier. 78% of workers' health and safety reps are male, and 76% of the survey respondents work in firms with more than 50 employees, so the survey offers no “snapshot” of the situation in smaller workplaces. A range of studies, however, have revealed that health and safety at work, compliance with regulations and prevention practices tend to be better in larger companies, due to their greater resources.

The full importance of prevention strategies in health and safety is shown by respondents' revelations that the physical hardships of work are still a very present thing. For example, 70.3% of respondents said that unsuitable postures were a risk in their workplace; 65.0% noise; 49.6% accidents involving work equipment, 49.6% work intensity and 41.2% chemical hazards.

How do respondents judge the work of their HSC?

51.3% of reps told us that HSCs are fulfilling their role properly, 25.5% that they they could do better, and 26.8% that management is not helping them do their job.

What are the driving forces behind company occupational safety and health policy?

69.6% of union reps say the HSC; 35.6% the company occupational safety and health service.

Less so were industrial pressure by the workforce, the works manager's strategy, the occupational health doctor and financial constraints (costs and incremental costs incurred from ignoring health and safety). Outside the workplace, workers' reps singled out regulatory requirements (49.0% of respondents) and insurers (30.6% of respondents) as the driving force behind company occupational safety and health policy.

Welfare at work legislation gives the employer a duty to ensure the safety and health of workers in every aspect related to the work, by implementing the general principles of prevention: avoiding risks, evaluating the risks which cannot be avoided, combating the risks at source. 65.9% of respondents reported that a risk assessment procedure had been done in their workplace. Of these, it appeared that in 65% of cases, the HSC had simply rubber-stamped the document, or had only been asked for its opinion on the final document by the works manager. Only 22.3% of union reps reported having been involved in choosing the risk assessment procedure; 19.6% said they had been consulted while the study was going on, and 15.9% said the HSC had a hand in the study through working groups.

34.1% of reps told us that extraordinary HSC meetings had been held in the past two years. Of these, 45% said the meetings were called after a work accident; 37.1% following the discovery of a serious and imminent danger. Other reasons, but to a lesser extent, were cases of occupational diseases (14.3%) and psychological harassment (12.8%).

These few bare facts are a timely reminder that health and safety at work, and the prevention policies that are the other side of the equation, are still very much live issues that must be the focus of ongoing trade union strategies.

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