



European Trade Union Confederation [ETUC]
Confédération européenne des syndicats [CES]

HEALTH AND SAFETY AT WORK: THE COMMUNITY STRATEGY NEEDS A NEW IMPETUS, SAYS THE ETUC

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As the European Commission puts forward its 'New strategy on health and safety at work 2007-2012', the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) stresses the need for a new momentum to European policy in this area.

The results of the Fourth European Working Conditions Surveys (2005), conducted by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, show that poor working conditions have a negative impact on the health of millions of workers in Europe. The upwards harmonisation of working conditions is consequently a key priority for Community action. The European Union's latest enlargement to 27 countries has sharply increased the gaps between Member States.

The ETUC will be commenting at a later date on the content of the new strategy for health and safety at work. Indeed, in contrast with the normal procedures applied since the first Community action plan (1978), this time the ETUC was kept in the dark about the draft versions of the communication presented today. In the past, a wide informal consultation always preceded the adoption of these programmes, with the Commission distributing a preliminary draft to the national authorities, trade unions and employers. However, for the first time, the preparation of the 2007-2012 strategy took place in the greatest secrecy. Even the Community agencies specialising in health and safety at work were kept out of the process, to say nothing of the trade union organisations and, apparently, BusinessEurope.

The ETUC considers it crucial to give the Community strategy a new impetus. The strategy implemented between 2002 and 2006 was noted for the blocking of initiatives announced by the Commission in two essential areas: the prevention of cancers of occupational origin, which each year cause many more deaths than fatal accidents in the workplace, and the prevention of repetitive strain injury (RSI), linked primarily to the organisation - and in particular the intensification - of work. RSI affects nearly one third of European workers

These issues will test the credibility of the new strategy. The ETUC calls for the revision of the existing directive on carcinogens, the adoption of

binding limit values on the principal carcinogens, in particular crystalline silica, and for the adoption of a comprehensive directive on repetitive strain injury, not limited to the simple coordination of existing provisions that have already been demonstrated to be insufficient.

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The Fourth European Working Conditions Survey states that the intensification of work is a broad trend, with more and more workers having to work at high speed and to tight deadlines. For example, 46% of European workers are obliged to work at very high speed during at least three quarters of their working time. This is an 11% increase on the 1990 survey.

The survey also highlights the importance of more decisive action by the European Union in connection with repetitive strain injury. The most common physical risk at work is repetitive hand/arm movements, with 62% of European workers saying they make such movements for a quarter of the time spent at work. This figure is an increase of 4% over the survey carried out in 2000. The second most common injury mentioned by workers is painful or tiring positions: 50% of workers spend at least one quarter of their working time in such positions. Nearly one third of the European working population suffers from backache, muscular pains and stress.

One of the conclusions to emerge from the survey is the extreme inequality of situations between countries, between sectors, between socio-professional groups and between the sexes.

Competition on the labour market seems to produce or aggravate significant inequalities. Around 35% of the workers interviewed stated that work affects their health. This percentage varies by more than 25% between the 10 new Member States (55.8%) and the 15 old Member States (30.6%).

Inequalities between women and men are flagrant. Women have markedly lower income and spend more time working when paid work and unpaid domestic duties are added up. Women with full-time jobs work an average of 63 hours a week (40 hours of paid work and 23 hours of unpaid domestic duties); those with part-time jobs work 54 hours a week (21.3 hours of paid work and 32.7 hours of unpaid domestic duties). For men, full-time employment means an average of 51 hours of work a week (43.1 hours of paid work and 7.9 hours of unpaid domestic duties); part-time employment translates into 30.8 hours of work per week (23.5 hours of paid work and 7.3 hours of unpaid domestic duties).