

The developing trade union input to CEN's standardisation work

Directive 89/392/EEC, known as the "Machinery Directive", represents the fundamental legal basis for the participation of union experts from all Member States of the European Economic Space (EU and EFTA) in the standardisation process, both at a national and a European level. To facilitate the co-ordination of union experts and to give adequate support to national unions who have no previous experience in this activity, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) established a technical body, the European Trade Union Technical Bureau for Health and Safety (TUTB), at the end of the 80's.

In 1995, the TUTB undertook research into the participation of union experts (their number and origin) in the European standardisation activities of the Technical Committees (TC) and Working Groups (WG) of CEN, the most important European standardisation body.

The main results of TUTB's research

The TUTB study, carried out by means of a questionnaire sent to all the European trade unions and members of the network of experts, showed that only about 100 union experts participate in the activities of CEN's Technical Committees (mainly TC 122 "Ergonomics" and TC 114 "Safety of Machinery"), and less than 100 participate in the Working Groups (see figures 1 and 2).

FIGURE 1 - UNION EXPERTS IN CEN's TCs



FIGURE 2 - UNION EXPERTS IN CEN's WGs



Over 90% of these union experts come from Denmark, Sweden and Norway, where they were participating in the standardisation activities before the introduction of the "new approach" which extended the participation of union experts to all the EES countries.

Compared with the thousands of experts from enterprises and public bodies, the handful of union experts have little chance of influencing the contents of the European harmonised standards and, as a result, the level of safety and environmental compatibility of the machines and products which are introduced onto the Single European Market.



Obstacles to participation

In order to collect workers' experience and to translate it into technical proposals, standardisation work requires knowledge of production cycles as well as competence in polytechnical, biomedical and organisational sciences, ergonomics and social sensitivity.

Furthermore, this activity demands the constant involvement of the experts, their availability to attend meetings and to maintain continuous contacts with the other members of the committees and working groups in which they must actively participate during the long and complex standardisation process.

The involvement becomes even more demanding when the participation passes from the national to the European level - the most important level for obtaining concrete results for workers. In order to be involved in standardisation on a European level, the expert needs to know English or, failing that, French or German. On a national level, it is also necessary to write comments on European technical standards in English, before they are adopted and published at national level.

While the participation of the enterprise's experts is in conformity with the enterprise's interests, union experts, who pursue objectives which are sometimes in conflict with those of the enterprises or bodies in which they work, often encounter difficult obstacles.

The European Trade Union Confederation and the national trade unions must exert a strong political pressure on the European Commission and the Governments of the Member States to encourage them to plan legal and financial instruments to enable real union participation in the European standardisation process.

Proposals

To improve the participation of union experts both quantitatively and qualitatively, the national union confederations and the ETUC must treat standardisation as a priority objective. They should recruit experts through sectoral and white-collar unions or associations and develop a national co-ordinating structure which is in constant contact with the TUTB at the European level.

Agreements between social partners

■ In order to promote the participation of professional and competent workers in union standardisation activities, it is first of all necessary to create favour-

able conditions (i.e., no negative consequences on the expert's career or on the costs sustained by the enterprises where s/he is working).

■ Agreements between national union confederations (with the assistance of the sectoral unions) and employers associations in all the Member States would be useful for defining rules for experts' participation, in particular the requirements for time-off, protecting the experts against any retaliation by the entrepreneurs.

■ It would also be useful to establish a solidarity fund among enterprises in order to share the costs of standardisation, avoiding the concentration of costs in those enterprises where the union experts are working.

Role of Governments

■ The Governments of the EES Member States should take in charge part of the costs of the participation of union experts (travel and allowance costs), particularly when they must attend European meetings in the head-offices of CEN or other European standardisation bodies.

■ They should also take in charge the costs of the experts' training, particularly for the improvement of their spoken and written English, which is a fundamental working tool for drafting European standards, as well as the costs of the experts' co-ordination both at a national and international level.

In Denmark, Sweden and Norway - European countries with a longer tradition in the participation of union experts in standardisation activities - these instruments already exist and have proven to be efficient (see TUTB study).

Although unions' contributions to technical standardisation have brought about considerable improvements, it is necessary to use these results to redefine the general legal framework and to encourage the Commission and the Governments of the Member States to determine the conditions for equal opportunities for all the interested parties.

National and European union confederations must consider union participation in standardisation activities as a priority for the improvement of workplace conditions. TUTB is a point of reference for the co-ordination and the training of union experts from various European countries and acts as the unions' interface with the CEN and the other European standardisation bodies.

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