

editorial

The Community is changing,

All may seem to have gone quiet on the Community health and safety front as a new treaty is brought in and a new Commission takes up the reins. But that should not mask the very real on-going issues, or the advances made through trade union efforts.

Paramount among these are the future consultation procedures on Commission initiatives. In future, it will have to take account of the legislative expertise and experience of the tripartite bodies, and the new Treaty procedures handing important new responsibilities to the social partners. But this procedural issue must not obscure the substantive issues, bearing in mind the demands of the ETUC's 9th Congress (Helsinki, June 99) for the EU to bring in measures against new work-related risks and to secure full transposition and implementation of directives. The ETUC Congress also stressed the failings of existing rules and lack of enforcement against a background of growing casualisation.

On the legislative side, the German Presidency dusted off the Commission's 1993 proposal for a physical agents directive. But, backed by virtually all the Council members, it proceeded to pull the proposal's teeth by limiting its scope to exposure to vibrations and dropping any mention of health exposure limits. The June Council's ostensible reason for this was the lack of scientific knowledge in the other areas like noise and electromagnetic fields. Surely some mistake, given its own Noise Directive adopted in 1986 (Directive 86/188/EEC) which should have been reexamined and adapted to scientific and technological progress by 1 January 1994. Furthermore, the "Health" Council of 8 June 1999 approved the principle of a Recommendation on electromagnetic fields referring to the 1998 ICNIRP (International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection) Recommendations. Work on the proposal for a vibrations directive will go forward under the Finnish Presidency.

A directive to protect workers from physical agent hazards

the issues are the same

remains paramount given the size of the workforce exposed and their health effects. The discussions on the vibrations directive raise urgent questions about accounting for the varied health effects of vibrations, especially on muscles and joints.

Musculoskeletal disorders are the main cause of work-related illness today. The ETUC's call for European action is starting to filter through. The special report on national practices, based on a survey of trade unions, included in this double issue of the TUTB Newsletter shows the problems faced by workers in proving the work-relatedness of their health problems. Articles by scientific and technical experts also report on the current consensus opinions on the issue. As we go to press, the European Agency in Bilbao is announcing its next round of work on the topic and a European week on the issue in the year 2000.

There has also been a result on a related issue. The Commission's decision to ban the placing on the market and use of all asbestos fibres EU-wide brings long-awaited cheer to all those who have been fighting to outlaw a product which is still and will go on killing mainly workers, given the volume of asbestos already in place that will have to be stripped out. A WTO ruling on a Canadian complaint against a French asbestos ban is imminent within months. It will be a clear-cut test of what importance the WTO intends giving to health risks - asbestos is a carcinogen and the risks are established beyond doubt - and especially its ability to "stick to its knitting" - it holds no remit for safety and health protection!

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IN THIS ISSUE

EDITORIAL

- 2** The Community is changing,
the issues are the same

ASBESTOS

- 4** Asbestos ban: towards a European consensus (IV)
Final page turned in an epic tale?

EUROPEAN LEGISLATION

- 6** Overhauling the Machinery Directive
10 Court of Justice ruling on Italy's carcinogen laws. A result
10 Seminar on the Mobile Construction Sites Directive

11 SPECIAL REPORT

Musculoskeletal disorders in Europe

- 12** MSD in Europe: unions show a lead
22 Assessment of exposure to repetitive upper limb movement: an IEA consensus document
27 Risk prevention and control strategy for upper limb MSD
32 MSD - "sick" workplace syndrome
36 Swedish regulations on prevention of MSD
39 European standards and risk assessment for MSD: challenging the future

HEALTH AND SAFETY MANAGEMENT

- 41** New turns in the debates on occupational health management systems

CHEMICAL SUBSTANCES

- 44** EU chemicals legislation under scrutiny
45 SLIMming down Directive 67/548/EEC

NEWS IN BRIEF

47

NEW PUBLICATIONS

- 49** Europe under Strain
Integrating Gender in Ergonomic Analysis. Strategies for transforming Women's Work

TUTB ACTIVITIES IN BRIEF

- 50** TUTB-SALTSA Conference
25-27 September 2000