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EDITORIAL

Implementing the Community strategy as enlargement nears

Eighteen months on from the publication of the Community strategy 2003-2006 which sparked hopes of a rekindled Community health and safety policy, the slow beginnings of it are taking shape.

The Council has adopted a decision on a “new-look” tripartite Advisory Committee to be set up from 1 January 2004. The national tripartite delegations will be cut from six to three members, and the number of working group participants from five to three members per interest group, with one notable exception - the group monitoring health and safety in the extractive industries, which will have five members per interest group. The Council hopes this will preserve the knowledge base developed since 1957 by the Safety and Health Commission for the Mining and Other Extractive Industries (SHCMOEI), which will be invaluable in the impending enlargement. Mining is still a major industry in some of the new accession countries.

This cut in the number of each country’s representatives on the Committee - which will expand from 15 to 25 Member States in 2004 - obviously has a direct impact on the trade union group, which will now have only one representative per country just as the Committee’s workload increases. It will have an expanded remit, covering all workers in all sectors, and the range and number of directives concerned is vast.

The Committee should be playing more of a role as a forum for initiatives taken under the strategy by European and national public and private actors. It would be a forum for discussion, coordination and working out common priorities involving the social partners and the Member States. It should also be a platform where the outcomes of the European social dialogue and common body of laws and regulations are brought into play and joined up as the basis for improving working conditions.

Also of interest in connection with the strategy roll-out is the examination of the Commission report on the application of the health and safety directives, which is top of the Advisory Committee’s work agenda. The report has been long-awaited, especially the analysis of

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the application of the Framework Directive, which is the cornerstone of any common prevention policy. For the trade union group, the report will mainly be a way of checking how the Member States are managing to enforce the Directive's provisions, especially on setting up preventive services to cover all workers (extended scope of preventive measures which requires multidisciplinary expertise) and measures to ensure representation in health and safety for workers, especially in SMEs.

Some points of the Advisory Committee's work programme have found their way into the mid-term Social Policy Agenda review just published by the Commission : the Community's road map for social policy. It reveals that on the legislative front, the Commission means to codify existing individual directives - hopefully using the opportunity to plug the existing gaps - and simplify Member States' administrative follow-up. This clarification of the Commission's plans is helpful as enlargement nears. It is clear from the accession treaties that most of the new countries will have transposed the Community *acquis* (established body of laws and regulations) by the time they join the Union on 1 May 2004 - the date when the Framework Directive will apply in all the Union's then-25 countries !

But simply taking over Community legislation is not enough in the Commission's book. It has to be put into practice, which means allocating resources, especially in terms of knowledge of work situations and training of experts and other actors. This line of argument cannot hide to view the reality of some Member States' attempts to use their presidency to start rolling back the Framework Directive's requirements, possibly in the hope that a new composition of the Council will be more amenable to their demands. Given that some applicant countries have finally dropped their calls for a transitional period in light of the high "price" to be paid in the negotiations in terms of financing and market access, it is about time that all EU countries got firmly behind applying the prevention principles set out in the Framework Directive, and that means putting appropriate resources into doing it !

Marc Sapir,

Director of the TUTB

THE EUROPEAN TRADE UNION TECHNICAL BUREAU FOR HEALTH AND SAFETY was established in 1989 by the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). It provides support and expertise to the ETUC and the Workers' Group of the Advisory Committee on Safety, Hygiene and Health Protection at Work. The TUTB is an associate member of the European Committee for Standardization (CEN). It coordinates networks of trade union experts in the fields of standardization (safety of machinery) and chemicals (classification of hazardous substances and setting occupational exposure limits). It also represents the ETUC at the European Agency for Health and Safety in Bilbao.

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