

REACH squares perfectly with the Lisbon Strategy approach. Making European business more competitive and enforcing workers' rights to health and safety in particular, are two key aspects of the debate around the proposed European chemicals legislation reform.

This reform obliges the political, social and economic actors to take a stand on society's imperative needs, and to ask questions about some of the ways in which they operate, especially as regards communication and transparency in decision-making.

Looking ahead

Joël Decaillon
Confederal Secretary, ETUC



Transparency and social responsibility

For trade unions, REACH prompts yet further thought about what they mean by "quality" of employment, reflected in the slogan *More and better jobs*, which was the European Trade Union Confederation's rallying call at its march through Brussels on 19 March 2005.

Arguably, the key challenge of globalization to the union movement may be that of defending jobs in a European area prey to high unemployment, while keeping up exacting demands about working conditions and the kind of new jobs created.

It is a fact that trade unionism is having to deal with changes in work organisation and workforces that are causing it difficulties. One instance of this that I am familiar with is the electricity sector in France, where the growth of subcontracting is pulling the union in different directions.

So, rank-and-file action in the EDF has helped preserve jobs with good terms and conditions of employment, but has been unable to stave off increasingly large-scale contracting-out of the most dangerous work, like having nuclear reactors cleaned by temporary workers. This assumption of the biggest risks by the most vulnerable workers is a big challenge to the union movement and calls the company to account about its social responsibilities.

Corporate social responsibility will only become reality if practical means are used to deliver information and transparency. REACH, when adopted, will be one such means.

Public opinion now demands transparency in decision-making, not only from the authorities, but also from the two sides of industry.

This demand for transparency, which is central to the REACH reform, calls into question the principle of data confidentiality. Industry must now bow to public demands and provide better information to its workers and consumers throughout the industrial process.

Furthermore, as the ETUC Executive Committee stressed in its declaration on REACH, the European trade unions strongly support the burden of proof being shifted from the authorities onto industry, and hence the volume rather than risk approach in the registration phase.

No sacrificing workers' rights

In the context of the Lisbon Strategy, REACH also prompts a rethink of the concept of competitiveness. The union movement is all for European businesses becoming more competitive, but only subject to certain conditions in terms of public and occupational health. The drive for competitiveness must not be at the expense of workers' rights to health and safety which, let us not forget, have been central to the labour movement from its very beginnings.

In the more specific case of the chemical industry, this means that where a substance puts the workers who produce it at risk, it has to be taken off the market. Competitiveness can never be a legitimate reason for keeping a product that damages workers' health. And trade unions would never in any circumstances agree to the debate being couched in those terms.

Co-operation between the ETUC, the European industry federations and national confederations may not always be plain sailing, but has proved effective. The union movement has spoken with a single voice, and that has got it listened to.

This intra-trade-union dialogue and the dialogue between industry workers' reps and the European authorities are essential, because the rules cannot cover all the issues. Involvement and initiatives by employers and trade unions to achieve the highest standards of health and safety are a prerequisite to implementing the European chemicals legislation reform.

The ETUC therefore wants workers' reps to be members of the future European chemicals agency that will be based in Helsinki. REACH will succeed only if there is a permanent, constructive social dialogue between the two sides of industry at the European and national levels. ■

