



**ETUI-REHS**

NEWSLETTER OF THE HEALTH AND SAFETY DEPARTMENT OF THE ETUI-REHS  
European Trade Union Institute for Research, Education and Health & Safety

**HESA**

No 34 JUNE 2007

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## Health and safety at work is about democracy too

Workers' health and safety representation has now become central to national and European preventive strategy agendas. Such forms of representation are found all across Europe. In some countries, it is probably the most widespread form of shopfloor representation. All the available evidence points towards the existence of such representation being closely associated with a more systematic organization of prevention. Above all, it enables more weight to be given to workers' interests and concerns about health and safety at work.

Of course, just having representation is no guarantee that it will do any good. Various things can make or break it in terms of effectiveness. Adequate training and information, access to expertise where complex issues require it, systematic support from trade unions – all these things play a key role.

In February this year, our institute co-hosted a conference on workers' health and safety reps with the European Trade Union Confederation. For two days, European experts and trade unionists discussed the findings of research and shopfloor experiences of health and safety reps' activities in work places. A number of conclusions can be drawn from these debates.

The European and many national prevention strategies pay scant regard to the vast potential of workers' safety representation, even though it may often make the difference between prevention as a tick-box exercise and an active policy drawing on the needs and initiatives of work forces. This disregard is seen in how policies are framed and is also reflected in the research. Research into health and safety at work that explores the social dynamics of health and safety at the workplace is thin on the ground. And yet it is common knowledge that the real level of prevention falls well short of what it could be using available knowledge.

There are two aspects to strengthening workers' representation. One is numbers - it means giving all workers access to this resource. We are nowhere near that today. Large

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swathes of workers are still denied any form of representation in health and safety. Sometimes, it is because they work in small firms. This is the case in countries that set workforce sizes for having formal representation too high. Job insecurity is another big factor of exclusion: millions of temporary agency workers have no health and safety reps while also generally being at greater risk. The other is quality - and here several factors are in play. Reps are often inadequately protected against dismissal or other forms of reprisal. Their training differs widely from one country or industry to the next. Trade unions have not always developed a strategy for leveraging their experience. One of the biggest issues is subcontracting relationships. A purely company-focused organization of workers' representation does not enable effective action to be taken on work organization in production processes that use multi-tier subcontracting.

Some start has been made on addressing these problems in a number of countries. The district safety reps scheme is the makings of an answer for small and medium-size firms. Site safety and trade union safety rep coordination committees offer ways of more easily tackling the problems created by subcontracting.

If such solutions are to be found, why are they not more widespread in Europe? Two things play into the reason. One is that not everyone has the same poor working conditions, so they tend to widen social inequalities in health. Most prevention policies do not set out to stop these inequalities being created, but are merely damage limitation exercises. It is the very limits set on the creation or operation of workers' representation that help paper over some of the health damage done and hold back direct labour action against it.

The other is quite simply a matter of workplace democracy. Employers are against workers having any control over their working conditions. But prevention policies can only be fully effective if they address work organization. They will not work properly if they are designed only as technical means of acting on selected aspects. Having workers' health and safety representation is a requirement for asking tough questions about work organization. And those questions are essential, for they show how far health and safety at work depends on the struggle to introduce democracy into working life. ■

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**THE HEALTH AND SAFETY DEPARTMENT OF THE EUROPEAN TRADE UNION INSTITUTE - RESEARCH, EDUCATION, HEALTH AND SAFETY (ETUI-REHS)** aims at promoting high standards of health and safety at the workplace throughout Europe. It succeeds the former European Trade Union Technical Bureau (TUTB), founded 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. It 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).

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The ETUI-REHS is financially supported by the European Community. The European Community is not responsible for any use made of the information contained in this publication.



**HESA Newsletter** No. 34, June 2008

The information contained in this issue is mainly as at 30 June 2008. The **HESA Newsletter** is published three times a year in English and French.

**Responsible Publisher:** Laurent Vogel, Director of the Health and Safety Department, ETUI-REHS

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**Cover photo:** BELPRESS, Domange Fernand

**Graphic design:** Coast, Brussels

Printing: Jacoffset

<http://hesa.etui-rehs.org>

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European workplace health and safety news

The ETUI-REHS Health and Safety Department's e-Letter is emailed free of charge to our subscribers monthly. HESAmail in a bilingual publication in English and French.

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