

“Working conditions are just not on the agenda until pay improves”

Corneliu Constantinoia is the Romanian workers’ representative on the Workers Group of the European Advisory Committee for Safety and Health at Work. He takes a first look at how far his country has come latterly in HSW matters, cautioning that progress in the law is not the same as real changes in working conditions.

How did things go with implementing EU health and safety at work law in the run-up to Romania joining the European Union?

The 1989 framework directive is now Romanian law, and transposition of the “daughter” directives is going forward. And while I think the government eased off a bit after accession, it has still certainly been a time of change. It has been an ongoing process in the sense that the Romanian authorities have been working very actively to get EU legislation onto the Romanian statute book. The only remaining big shortcoming is the work accident and occupational disease insurance system, which was reformed in 2004 but is still not working properly. Workers’ representation in health and safety is another vexed issue. Workers have a statutory right to representation, but it is not really happening on the shopfloor, and the labour inspectorate does little to enforce it.

What has the move to a market economy meant for working conditions in Romania?

The Romanian economy today mainly consists of small and medium-sized firms. In other words, there has been shift in the workforce from big state-owned companies to much smaller privately-owned firms. This has come about with the transition from an industrial to a service economy. Access to preventive services is still a problem in most workplaces: preventing work accidents and occupational diseases are not top of many employers’ agendas. By and large, they take action only after a labour inspection visit.

Romania may be becoming a service economy, but it still has quite a big mining industry. Has joining the EU helped improve safety standards in this high-risk sector?

The extraction and mining industry workforce has shrunk significantly of late. Those who still have jobs in it enjoy better working conditions than in the past, partly because there are fewer workers, but the same number of health and safety experts. Also, a special health and safety programme has been developed for the mining industry. That said, the industry still has a particularly high work accident rate.

From the official statistics on occupational diseases, Romania looks like a real workers’ paradise...

The poor general level of health surveillance for workers in my country clearly does nothing to throw work-related health problems into sharp relief. So not many workers make the link between their poor health and current or past working conditions. Also, because diagnosis of diseases is still substandard and under-resourced, many cancers linked to particular industrial activities – the asbestos industry, especially – just go undiagnosed. A more structural issue is the continuing lack of cooperation between the Labour and Health Ministries, and under-resourcing of occupational health services. Also, the procedure for reporting occupational diseases is still tied up in red tape, so workers tend not to do it.

What are the Romanian trade union movement’s priorities for protection of workers’ health?

Like everywhere else, the trade union agenda is still focused on pay claims, especially as wages in my country are probably the lowest in the European Union. The average wage is not enough to meet people’s basic needs. This clearly makes it hard to push demands for better working conditions, especially as a health and safety culture has never loomed large in Romanian labour relations. I think that if we are to get anywhere on the health and safety front, we first need to get results on pay. Until wages get up to a certain level, there is no hope of getting workers mobilized for better working conditions. ■

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The state of working conditions in Romania

	EU-27 (%)	Romania (%)
Health		
Consider health or safety at risk because of work	28.6	49.1
Work affects health	35.4	54.4
<i>How does work affects your health?</i>		
– Hearing problems	7.2	10.5
– Skin problems	6.6	13.0
– Backache	24.7	42.4
– Muscular pains	22.8	39.2
– Respiratory difficulties	4.7	14.8
– Stress	22.3	35.0
– Overall fatigue	22.5	44.6
Absent for health problems in previous year	22.9	11.4
Average days health-related absence in previous year	4.6	2.0
Physical work factors		
Vibrations	24.2	25.6
Noise	30.1	26.2
High temperatures	24.9	45.0
High temperatures	22	38.6
Breathing in smoke, fumes, powder or dust (such as wood dust or mineral dust)	19.1	29.1
Breathing in vapours such as solvents and thinners	11.2	11.2
Handling chemical substances	14.5	16.7
Radiation (X-rays, radioactive radiation, welding light, laser beams)	4.6	5.2
Tobacco smoke from other people	20.1	25.0
Tiring or painful positions	45.5	61.5
Carrying or moving heavy loads	35	45.1
Repetitive hand or arm movements	62.3	77.2
Pace of work and work organisation		
Short repetitive tasks of less than 1 minute	24.7	26.8
Short repetitive tasks of less than 10 minutes	39	41.7
Working at very high speed	59.6	67.1
Working to tight deadlines	61.8	62.0
Pace of work dependent on automated equipment / machine	18.8	21.2
Pace of work depends on boss	35.7	39.4
Has enough time to get the job done	69.6	71.8

Source : Fourth European Working Conditions Survey, 2007, 139 p.