

The Community strategy 2007–2012

A trip on a UFO

The Commission Communication on the Community health and safety at work strategy for the period 2007-2012 received short shrift from the unions. "The Commission's general approach seems to view occupational health primarily as a variable of the productivity and competitiveness of businesses", lamented the European Trade Union Confederation in a press release.

Laurent Vogel goes further in his forensic analysis of the Commission text published here to claim that, "Productivity seems to have become an end in itself and the basis for legitimating any social policy". On top of that particular political spin, the ETUI-REHS researcher catalogues a string of other failings in the new Community strategy, singling out the failure to mention the importance of workers taking part in implementing prevention policies, and stripping away the labour inspectorate's policing and enforcement responsibilities to reduce it to a business services agency.

The failure to mention REACH's potentials for improving workers' protection from chemical hazards and the scant attention paid to tackling work-related illnesses evidence the yawning gulf that seems to divide the European establishment from workplaces. It is as if the authors of the Commission document had been whisked off on a flying saucer for a long trip a million miles from Earth-bound factories, assembly lines and building sites.

And yet European policy-makers have enough surveys, figures and other statistics at their fingertips. The working conditions survey done by the Dublin Foundation among 30 000-odd European workers, for instance, whose key findings we report on here. They make uncomfortable reading, and offer a tiny glimpse of what work intensification means for the health of millions of workers. The figures

– 35% of European workers say their work is making them ill – give the lie to the Commission's favoured rhetoric that quality and productivity at work go hand in hand.

The analysis of the findings of the ETUI-REHS's survey on labour inspection systems in Europe unfortunately brings no ray of hope to the gloomy picture on working conditions. Laurent Vogel finds a growing gap between labour inspectorate responses, still very largely focused on work accidents, and the challenges posed by preventing occupational illnesses, which are now the foremost cause of work-related deaths.

These findings, and our complaints about them, are not just directed to the European authorities.

We also want the trade unions to take them on board, in the hope that they will see them as an invitation to take a longer, harder look at their own health and safety at work strategies.