

Discouraging check-up for Croatian workers

Data on health and safety at work are fairly rare for Croatia, a country that began negotiating its accession to the European Union in October 2005. To the best of our knowledge, there has never been a large-scale inquiry into working conditions at the national level.

Fortunately, Croatia was included in the wide survey carried out in autumn 2005 by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, based in Dublin¹. Just over 1000 Croatian workers were interviewed.

Before reviewing in detail the results of that opinion poll in terms of health and safety at work, it is important to look at a few key indicators for the Croatian labour market. These will allow for better understanding of the socio-economic context of Croatian working conditions.

In 2005, rising unemployment reached the rate of 14%, placing Croatia among the European countries with the most acute unemployment problem. Combating unemployment is particularly difficult because nearly one third of young people are concerned and because 36% of the jobless have been without work for over three years. Temporary contracts are the rule for 12.4% of the workforce, placing Croatia slightly below the EU-25 average (14%). Another 8.7% of the working population, i.e. 10% less than the European average, work part time.

The manufacturing industry remains by far the leading sector of the economy. It provides jobs for over 30% of the population. Unskilled workers make up nearly 30% of the labour force, a record in Europe. Croatia is also the European country with the highest percentage (30%) of low skilled blue collar workers.

The private sector is made up primarily of single-person companies or very small companies with no more than nine employees. Croatians work an average of 43 hours a week, one of the highest levels in Europe. Over 20% of the workforce work over 48 hours a week.

40% of workers suffer from repetitive strain injury

More than half of Croatia's workers say that their work has an impact on their health, a figure well above the EU-27 average (35%), and nearly 30% are "not at all satisfied" or "not very satisfied" with their working conditions. These two figures put Croatia in a relatively homogeneous group of countries, made up of a majority of new EU Member States, which could be described as countries not satisfied with existing working conditions.

Absenteeism is another element that reflects the difficult relationship certain categories of Croatian workers seem to have with their job. With just under 20% of those interviewed saying they had to stop working for health reasons over the past 12 months, Croatia is below the European average (23%). So that is nothing alarming. What is telling, however, is that the average length of absence for illness per worker comes to 9.5 days, whereas the European average is under five days. While Croatian workers take sick leave less often than their European colleagues, they apparently do so for particularly long periods.

Can this be ascribed to more difficult working conditions than elsewhere in Europe for an important part of the population who, as we saw above, have low skills levels and hold industrial jobs, often in very small companies? Answering that question would obviously require a more detailed study focusing more specifically on Croatia. The "health" and "work organisation" segments of the Dublin survey (see table) nevertheless provide an initial answer.

Indeed, health problems caused by "classic" work-related physical risks (exposure to noise, carrying heavy loads, breathing in dust, exposure to chemicals, etc.) are systematically higher in Croatia than in the EU-27. This is particularly the case for repetitive strain injury: nearly 40% of Croatian workers complain of back pain or muscular pain caused by their jobs, which is practically twice the European average. Given this over-exposure to traditional risk factors, it is quite surprising to note that only half as many Croatians complain about general fatigue compared to EU workers. Cultural element may come into play in explaining this paradox.

Could this perhaps be due to Croatia's relative imperviousness to new forms of work organisation? High rates of output and respect for tight deadlines are markedly below the European average and 80% of Croatian workers say they have enough time to complete the job assigned to them.

With regard to psycho-social risks, Croatian women seem particularly vulnerable: 10% of female workers say they are victims of intimidation or harassment at the workplace and 6% are victims of sexual harassment. These figures place Croatia among the European countries with the highest levels of psychological violence against women.

Lack of political will and employer's indifference

The Law on Protection at Work is recent. It was adopted in 1996 and is obviously related to the

¹ *Fourth European Working Conditions Survey*, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2007, 139 p.

country's European ambitions, demonstrated immediately after the war by the Croatian government. While Croatian legislation is being harmonised with the Community acquis at a sustained pace, workers are seeing few changes at the workplace. The accession process has contributed to important developments, particularly in the legal and institutional spheres, but the hard reality of the world of work has evolved little since the 1990s, states a work co-published recently by the European Commission and the International Labour Office².

The lack of interest of political circles, employers and trade unions, pinpointed in this publication, obviously does not contribute to promoting debate in companies on the challenges of health and safety at work. In addition, social dialogue on these subjects is the result of a young and fragile institutional base. Five years ago, a National Council for Work Protection was created on a tripartite basis. In its *National Programme for the protection of health and safety at work*, made public in 2005, that body drew up a list of shortcomings in this area³.

We would single out the following:

- non systematic follow-up on the health of workers exposed to specific risks: only 10% are regularly monitored;
- legislation that does not encourage employers to work towards prevention, since the costs of occupational accidents and illnesses are 100% covered by the community;
- the limited resources made available to the labour inspectorate: there were only 89 inspectors in 2006 for the entire country.

Against that backdrop, and without a reaction by a trade union movement weakened by its fragmentation – the country has no fewer than six trade union confederations –, the odds are that the legislative *aggiornamento* (updating) will continue without giving impetus to a real improvement in working conditions. ■

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The state of working conditions in Croatia	EU-27 (%)	Croatia (%)
Health		
Consider health or safety at risk because of work	28.6	38.9
Work affects health	35.4	51.8
How does work affects your health?		
– Hearing problems	7.2	10.2
– Skin problems	6.6	11.4
– Backache	24.7	41.5
– Muscular pains	22.8	37.6
– Respiratory difficulties	4.7	8.5
– Stress	22.3	35.2
– Overall fatigue	22.5	9.8
Absent for health problems in previous year	22.9	19.4
Average days health-related absence in previous year	4.6	9.4
Physical work factors		
Vibrations	24.2	29.1
Noise	30.1	33.9
High temperatures	24.9	29.9
Low temperatures	22	26.3
Breathing in smoke, fumes, powder or dust (such as wood dust or mineral dust)	19.1	29.6
Breathing in vapours such as solvents and thinners	11.2	17.1
Handling chemical substances	14.5	16.8
Radiation (X-rays, radioactive radiation, welding light, laser beams)	4.6	5.3
Tobacco smoke from other people	20.1	35.9
Tiring or painful positions	45.5	58.8
Carrying or moving heavy loads	35	37.4
Repetitive hand or arm movements	62.3	69.9
Pace of work and work organisation		
Short repetitive tasks of less than 1 minute	24.7	16.7
Short repetitive tasks of less than 10 minutes	39	33.8
Working at very high speed	59.6	23.2
Working to tight deadlines	61.8	43.6
Pace of work dependent on automated equipment / machine	18.8	22.6
Pace of work depends on boss	35.7	42.9
Has enough time to get the job done	69.6	79.9

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

² *Evolving World of Work in the Enlarged EU. Progress and Vulnerability*, ILO/ European Commission, November 2006, p. 91.

³ *Evolving World of Work*, op.cit, p. 107.