

Health and safety in Croatia: a curate's egg

Jadranka Mustajbegovic is a Professor in the Department of Environmental and Occupational Health School of Medicine at the University of Zagreb. She helped organize the International Symposium on Occupational Health and Safety held in the Croatian town of Sibenik on 24-26 May 2007.

The conference brought together health and safety experts from a range of professional backgrounds – workers, health and safety reps and specialists from company and external preventive services, as well as representatives of government departments and academe. The conference was focused on the general state of health and safety at work in Croatia, and more specifically in the metal industry in neighbouring countries. The participants looked at whether OHS policy is up to scratch for when and if Balkan states join the European Union.

We asked Prof. Mustajbegovic about the main challenges faced by this EU candidate country.

Could you point to the main factors that are holding back health and safety at work in Croatia?

First is the poor health and safety culture – that has a very negative impact. There are several reasons why I say this. Employers and employees have different and distorted views of health and safety at work. Workers see it as a way of getting better financial compensation for hard work and hazardous conditions, while employers are only concerned to tick the legal boxes. There is no law in Croatia that grants benefits to workers exposed to hazardous and strenuous working conditions. But such practices are clearly widely used by employers and accepted by workers. Globally, health and safety awareness is very poor.

Secondly, the Croatian government is not concerned to improve the situation. There are no programmes, projects or initiatives to drive change or increase awareness, just one or two measures to bring Croatian law into line with the *acquis communautaire* (framework of Community legislation and regulations).

Thirdly, those involved with health and safety at work feel hamstrung by their lack of power. One case in point is an unsuccessful *National Programme for the protection of health and safety at work* worked out by the tripartite National Council for OHS, which I in fact chaired for six years. The Council put a lot of effort into persuading politicians to get this on the

parliamentary agenda with a view to adopting the programme. In fact, it was nigh-impossible to get through to our MPs. The debate in Parliament never got off the ground. The national programme was never seen as an issue that required policy attention. In these circumstances, ordinary workers have little hope of claiming their rights to healthy and safe work.

This evokes parallels in other countries. But is it all bad news for health and safety in Croatia? Is there anything positive happening in the field, any recent achievements or discernible positive trends in Croatia?

I am chiefly an academic, don't forget, so my knowledge of actual coalface practice is fairly limited. But I can point to some improvements, mainly in the ways we tackle the problem.

In the old days, there was a general approach to health and safety. Someone had overall responsibility, whereas nowadays, the responsibility has been shifted to individual workers and managers, not just as a duty but also as a consequence of a perception of potential health hazards. More effort has been put into looking for better solutions in health and safety. In the past, technicians, managers and also workers felt confident about applying established methods. This approach has now changed somewhat, but in the right direction. This may well be because we have a more democratic and more open society.

Building awareness of the lack of health and safety expertise is another big driver. Notwithstanding government inactivity, Croats are organizing more training courses and events, often with media support. Croatia has a long tradition of postgraduate studies in occupational health and safety, dating back to 1949. Occupational health was introduced as a specialization for medical doctors in 1961. Zagreb University recently opened its faculty of workplace safety to provide systematic training for safety specialists. Various students from the faculty attended this conference. It was extremely important for them to set what they had learned against practical experience reported from different countries and to identify common thinking with occupational health specialists. This was also important for the future of health and safety in our country. ■

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