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EDITORIAL

Revitalizing Community occupational health policy

This issue of the TUTB Newsletter sounds a wake-up call. In two years, the deadline set for the Community health at work strategy 2002-2006 to be implemented runs out. But well past the half-way mark, it is clear that delivery is falling well short of what was wanted and needed. This confirms our initial fears. The analysis behind the Community strategy was generally right, but still much too hazy on practical measures and the timetable. Instead of being a firm work programme, the strategy was over-heavy on general pronouncements about the need to combine many different approaches and instruments. It is a failing that reflected the fear, reinforced by past experience, of a head-on battle with the employers and the most anti-worker governments.

Community health at work policies must be revitalized - and now. It is no time for resting on laurels, but for recognizing the gap that is growing between what is really being done and the actuality of worsening working conditions and growing risks in some areas. The only way to make up the lost ground is to bring in new measures without delay. All the Community institutions have a big responsibility. The Commission must frame the proposals and adopt the instruments that are within its powers to do. It also needs to boost its own internal capacities in the specific area of occupational health. This means reversing a trend that has been going on for over 10 years and finding sufficient resources for the Luxembourg-based unit in charge of occupational health. The many challenges of enlargement demand a big push on this if Community action is not to forfeit all credibility. The Council of Ministers and Parliament must legislate in different areas and fight off the repeated assaults by

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the advocates of deregulation and a “rest from legislation”. The Member States must frame national prevention strategies and help improve the practical implementation of Community rules, not least by tightening up labour inspectorate enforcement.

The trade unions can do their bit by helping to improve the identification of needs. They are the link between daily workplace life and Community policy-making. The signing of a European agreement on stress in October 2004 showed that the European Trade Union Confederation takes its responsibilities seriously. The European Transport Workers’ Federation campaign in defence of the safety of dockers shows what trade union action can achieve. In companies, an active trade union policy on occupational health generally means the difference between tick-box application of the rules and effective prevention. This contribution obviously depends on what rights are given to workers’ health and safety reps, their access to the information and training they need, and the quality of the support that trade unions provide them with. Trade unions expect the other players not to systematically try and dodge difficult issues.

The years 2005-2006 will be a crunch time in many respects, and a litmus test of whether post-enlargement Europe will be more than a simple single market governed by the undercutting pressures of market forces, sacrificing workers’ lives and health, or whether the development of a social Europe will bring better living and working conditions. ■

Marc Sapir, Director of the TUTB

Goodbye and good luck, Janine!

The TUTB was started up fifteen years ago to provide the ETUC and its members with expertise and information on health and safety in order to strengthen the trade union input to framing European rules and common standards of protection against the risks and situations faced by Europe’s workers. As the TUTB developed, it started producing a Newsletter - now up to its 26th issue. It has published books and brochures - thirty-odd to date. It has staged a series of international conferences for trade unionists and experts, launched and built up a website that provides information on its own activities, and on key developments in European policy as well as national occurrences and events.

All during this time, the TUTB has been setting up networks of experts and trade unionists to focus the examination of workplace health and safety issues, but also, and especially, to give a voice to all those working every day in firms, industry branches, preventive services and public services to forge the link between employment and work standards.

If there is one person in the TUTB who has played a key role in all that time, that person is Janine Delahaut, who was in charge of the TUTB’s information and publications department. She has now decided to steer her career path in a different direction. We wish her the same success and satisfaction in her new working life. We know that her information resource work will leave its indelible mark on the TUTB’s future output, and that it will continue to grow with the support of her successor, Denis Grégoire, the other colleagues on the staff, and the trade union experts.