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## Preface

*The REACH Regulation (Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation of CHEMicals) came into force on 1 June 2007 throughout the European Union (EU). The new law has two main aims: to ensure a high level of protection for human health and the environment, including by improving knowledge and information about chemicals; and to enhance the competitiveness of the European chemical industry.*

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After close to a decade's rancorous debate, REACH replaced over 40 old laws with a single streamlined regulation. The core of this reform is that it shifts the burden of proof from the Member States onto industrial operators. REACH says that manufacturers and importers must evaluate the risks of using chemicals, and must supply users with adequate safety information.

The use of chemicals takes a heavy toll on European workers in all sectors - up to 30% of recognized occupational diseases and tens of thousands of preventable deaths each year are caused by exposure to hazardous substances. This causes wide social inequalities in health, and is why the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) have consistently pushed to get this reform onto the books and fully benefit the health and safety not just of workers but also consumers and the environment.

The text finally adopted at the end of 2006 is a balancing act between more ambitious proposals to protect human health and the environment and the chemical industry's determination, backed by many governments, to keep control over the decision of what to place on the market. It is too soon to tell what impact REACH will have. The reform will be phased in up to 2018. What real impact it will have cannot be said for certain from REACH's often unclear wording, but will be shaped by many factors that will determine how much worker and public oversight there is on what industry does.

Trade unions would be mistaken to ease up on their efforts in the belief that REACH implementation will now be plain sailing and that improvements in workplaces will follow as a matter of course. This is why the ETUC has fought for representation on the Management Board and all the scientific committees of the

European Chemicals Agency (ECHA), the body responsible for managing the Regulation and ensuring it is implemented consistently throughout the EU. At the sharp end — in workplaces — workers' reps will also have a key role in seeing that REACH delivers its potential benefits for occupational health and safety.

REACH will provide new knowledge about the hazards, exposures and risks of chemicals, but also encourage replacement of the most dangerous substances by safer alternatives. This new information should be used to best effect by firms to implement effective risk reduction measures so as to bring down the work-related disease and death tolls from exposure to hazardous chemicals.

This brochure has therefore been written for use by trade union reps in the countless workplaces across Europe where workers are exposed to chemicals. The first section explains the main points of the reform. The second tells you about your firm's obligations under REACH. The third details how REACH and specific EU worker protection laws link up and can act together, while the fourth and final section offers some practical ways of using REACH as a means for union action in workplaces.

— *Laurent Vogel*

Director, Health and Safety Department, European Trade Union Institute