

International standardization and the management of health at work

A debate has been going on, especially at European level¹, for several years now on the role of technical standardization in setting and applying rules on health at work. The latest twist in that debate comes with the ISO's (International Organization for Standardization) planned Workshop on Occupational Health and Safety Management Systems Standardization.

This is part of the ISO's quest for new areas of technical standardization activity, building on the experience gained with the ISO 9000 quality management and quality assurance standards.

This short article cannot possibly air all the questions which should be discussed before deciding whether such an international standard is needed. They include the legal nature of technical standards which tend to be non-mandatory documents drawn up by private organizations, but in the Community framework - notably in the case of the "New Approach" directives - may be more complex, semi-public and tantamount to secondary legislation.

They relate also to the relevance of technical standardization in labour relations, unconnected with the physical characteristics of an object or a production process.

They also concern the social dynamics of standardization: is it an alternative or supplement to public regulation, be it national or international (notably the ILO's international conventions)? What are the respective roles of thinkers and doers in the division of labour? And what of the disparities between actual work, instructions, and management standards?

It means looking at how the standards are to be used and their consequence, be it in terms of international trade or inter-company relations, especially the development of subcontracting relations and changes they may induce in the activities of inspection bodies.

The complexity of the debate explains why, at the World Congress on Occupational Health held in Madrid in April 1996, meetings were organized to compare and contrast the different viewpoints. The TUTB took part in these meetings and presented its experience of European standardization.

The first meeting was organized by the ICFTU (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions) on 21 April as an exchange of different viewpoints between trade union officials from different areas of the world. All were agreed that trade unions could actively concur in an occupational health management standard only if standardization bodies accepted a certain number of ground rules. More specifically this means accepting that the management of health at work cannot be left solely, or even mainly, to management techniques used by company management to attain their own pre-set objectives, but must always be part of a process between different players (workers and employers in the firm, workers, employers and public authorities in broader society). Accepting that principle entails a series of concrete statutory provisions through which to guarantee workers' independent right of action: right of warning

and withdrawal to a place of safety, information, training and consultation of workers, guarantees against reprisals by employers, etc.

The second meeting was organized on 24 April by the ILO (International Labour Organization) for representatives of the international organizations concerned - ILO, WHO and ISO - prevention specialists, trade union officials and employers. The mood of the meeting was one of pronounced reservations, if not outright opposition. The prevailing view was that the ISO must clarify its intentions and that the debate must go beyond the "technical feasibility" of a standard to consider the social use to which it will be put. The main concerns were the need to strengthen the role of the ILO's tripartite international labour standards, the importance of inspection machinery, and the unwillingness to see it partly replaced by private, commercial certification procedures.

Later, on 23 May 1996, the TUTB staged a meeting of trade union officials from different European countries (also attended by an ICFTU official) to prepare for the plenary session of the ACSH. Priorities for the debate in progress were refined and specific aspects of the European situation were clarified.

The European Commission was to present two documents to the Advisory Committee's plenary meeting². In one of these³, the Commission outlines its health and safety management activities and, recognizing that the international standardization work in this area will have repercussions at Community level, urges the Member States to mount a debate on the advisability of such a standard having regard to the Community legislative framework, the existing role of ISO 9000 certification, and the economic impact of applying such standards, particularly for SMEs. The other document⁴ airs concerns about the rising number of certification systems and the cost burden on firms, and reports that the Commission is considering issuing mandates to the European standards institutions in order to clarify the position of the Community authorities.

The TUTB meeting also highlighted aspects of the transposition and application of article 6 (1) of the Framework Directive⁵. The participants stressed the need to be better informed about the national application given to this requirement. They also emphasized the importance of the trade union movement having an initial detailed critical assessment of the impact of ISO 9000 certification on working conditions and a study of countries in which quality management systems have provided the basis for official regulations on health and safety management, such as Norway and Sweden's "internal control" regulations. A review of how economic incentives contribute to health and safety, especially in SMEs⁶, was also called for.

The next stage of this discussion will come at an ISO workshop in September 1996, after which the ISO will decide whether to set up a new technical committee to draft such a standard. The debate with the ISO will be followed by a meeting of the ICFTU health at work group (October 1996). There will be a further report after these two meetings.

¹ See the Commission Memorandum: The role of standardization in the implementation of the directives adopted on the basis of article 118 A of the EEC Treaty, and the Luxembourg Advisory Committee's Opinion on it.

² The Advisory Committee reached no conclusions on this issue at its May 1996 plenary.

³ ACSH Doc. 5451/96.

⁴ ACSH Doc. 5356/1/96.

⁵ "(...) the employer shall take the measures necessary for the safety and health protection of workers, (...) as well as provision of the **necessary organization and means**".

⁶ See the Dublin Foundation's published reports on this, especially: *A system of economic incentives to improve the working environment in Europe*, Stephen Bailey, Kirsten Jorgensen, Christian Koch, Wolfgang Krüger, Henrik Litske, European Foundation for the Improvement of Working Conditions, 1995.