

A trade union methodology for risk assessment

The TUTB recently staged a seminar on a proposed trade union strategy on risk assessment in association with AFETT (Association for the European Technology Training of Workers).

A score of participants from most European Union countries plus an official from Brazil's Unitary Workers' Federation (CUT) took part. The seminar was part of a longer term TUTB project with a network of trade unionists from different countries to devise trade union instruments for assessing working conditions. It followed on from a first two-week seminar in 1995, at which the basic concepts and trade union priorities were mapped out.

The starting point for it all was the finding that the same risk assessment provisions introduced into national laws under the Framework directive was resulting in very different practices. So the essential thing is to clarify what trade unions can contribute in this field to prevent risk assessment being used as an excuse for not taking preventive measures (because of "negligible" risks) or excluding workers and their trade union organizations from them (from taking a purely technical approach which dismisses workers' subjective experiences).

The seminar's aims

The new seminar aimed to do two things. One was to check a number of working assumptions in practice. To do this, the seminar was staged in Valencia (Spain), where participants were able to follow a risk assessment set up on the basis of the seminar backgrounders in three firms: a metal manufacturing plant supplying railway rolling stock; a ceramics factory and a branch bank. But it was also to test the validity of a proposed methodology devised by the TUTB in co-operation with other trade union organizations, especially ISTAS (Trade Union Institute for Work, Environment and Health) in Spain and Sindnova in Italy.

The basic premise of the proposed methodology was that trade union activists should not stick to just checking on risk assessments carried out by the employer or prevention service. Risk assessment must be used to put the workers' own priorities on the agenda and act at every stage of the evaluation which firms must organize to comply with the regulations. There are five key points about a trade union risk assessment:

- it aims to reconstruct the entire production process such as to give workers an overall view of production activity. It is more than just a list of known or supposed risks (as identified by occupational disease and industrial accident compensation systems or stipulated in the regulation);
- it factors in workers' subjective experiences to build up a body of collective knowledge and give expression to individual pain and problems. It is a tool for socialization and mobilization;
- it aims to improve relations between trade union prevention officials and the other trade union activists and officials to prevent health and welfare at work issues being dealt with only after the event;
- it must support trade union policy towards employers and preventive services by giving workers the means to act independently in accordance with their own needs;

- it is intended to bring about practical changes. The idea is not to write screeds of theory, but to build up knowledge for action one step at a time.

A critical assessment

While the participants broadly agreed with the methodology suggested, they pointed out a number of weaknesses.

- The methodology is too demanding in some respects and could only be properly applied in firms where the conditions are absolutely right. This is not the case for most workers, and the assessment of working conditions has to be seen as a process of building up strength, which may mean starting with more limited objectives (a specific priority like reducing musculo-skeletal disorders, say), so the methodology suggested ought to be more flexible in practice.
- If it is to be practically applicable, unions must be clear about what they do at each stage compared with what the employer does and what type of relations they should maintain with the preventive services and other players (like the factory inspectorate). A general document can obviously only set out broad issues, not propose solutions because the range of specific situations is too wide. What is clear, on the other hand, is that every step taken in health at work must be positioned within the overall framework of company trade union policy and that the trade union activists responsible for prevention matters must not be treated as subject specialists unconnected with other areas of trade union action (demands, recruitment, participation in employee representation bodies like works councils, etc.).
- The links between working conditions and the gender dimension of workplaces and trade union organization was regarded as a key element. The under-representation of women (approximately a third of the total, but initially barely an eighth of applications) itself reflects the difficulties which the union movement has in putting into practice a policy based on the needs of both sexes, not just male priorities. The women participants set up their own meeting to voice their own criticisms of the way the course was run and suggested setting up a network of European women trade unionists on “women, health and work”.

Future work

At the end of the seminar, it was decided to take the work forward by collecting information on trade union risk assessment initiatives as the basis for a database of experiences consultable by anyone interested and for refining the methodology presented at the seminar in the light of practical cases. A TUTB publication on it will follow in 1998.

Tell us about your experiences

The TUTB wants to set up a database on risk assessment (in the broad sense of evaluating working conditions), especially initiatives taken by trade union organizations. They may be at any levels - company, industry, geographical area, occupation, etc - and be general or on specific problems. Please send whatever documents you have available and, if you can, include a descriptive sheet covering the following matters:

1. What methodology was used?

You can use the following classification as a guide:

- analysis of production process;
- identification of risks;
- identification of problems based on objective indicators;
- identification of problems based on subjective indicators;
- overall evaluation of the prevention policy and its instruments.

2. How was the assessment negotiated?

Did the negotiations also cover environmental and quality policy issues?

3. Briefly describe the attitudes of:

- the workers;
- the workers' representatives (shop stewards, health and safety committees, works councils, etc.);
- trade union officials;
- technicians or experts;
- the employer(s).

4. What training was there prior to the assessment exercise?

5. What difficulties were encountered?

6. What results were achieved:

- with the assessment (what unknown problems were brought to light?);
- in terms of changes to the working conditions?

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