

Greece : difficulty in putting the new regulatory framework into practice

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After the United Kingdom, Italy and Spain¹, we now continue our review of national debates on the application of the new health and safety rules with an overview of the situation in Greece. The publication of a survey on the development of working conditions and the working environment over the past 20 years has revealed a serious gap: the legislative framework has been modernised, but the policies and means necessary to its implementation are lacking.

Health, safety and working conditions in Greece. Recent developments and future prospects (in Greek), Georges Spyropoulos ed. (Athens/Komotini, Ant. N. Sakkoulas Publishers, 2000), 390 pages, 6 000 drachmas.

On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the presentation of a report by the International Labour Office to the Greek government containing the analysis and recommendations of a multidisciplinary team of experts on the situation regarding working conditions and the working environment in Greece, a group of ten Greek specialists (comprising academics, occupational physicians, ergonomics specialists and labour inspectors) conducted a study of the changes that have been brought about in this field in the course of the past 20 years. The survey, which has just been published, reviews the progress made during that period - in particular with regard to the institutional and legal framework for health and safety at work - and reveals the deficiencies and main problems facing Greece today, whether these concern the situation at the workplace, the mode of operation of public services and institutions (labour inspectorate, technical infrastructures for protection and prevention of occupational risks, education and research) or the participation of workers' and employers' organisations in prevention and protection activities.

In order to be understood, the efforts to modernise regulations on health and safety at work which have been made in Greece since 1985 on the initiative of the Greek legislator and which have been intensified since the beginning of the 1990s with the transposition of Community Directives, must be placed in the context of the development of the general economic, social and institutional framework during that period: the accession of Greece to the European Communities in 1981, the persistent world economic crisis, the rise in unemployment, the increasing globalisation of trade, the adoption of a series of laws designed to modernise and democratise industrial relations but also - more recently - to introduce a more flexible legal framework in the field, the progressive shift of employment to the tertiary sector, the calling in question of the stability and traditional framework of individual employment relationships, the growing use of new forms of work organisation, the massive advent of migrant workers, and the development of the black economy and undeclared work.

The transposition of the 1989 framework Directive and the other health and safety Directives, which has now been completed despite several years' delay, has not given rise to a real national debate; nor was it preceded by an overall assessment of its economic impact on undertakings and on the State budget. Furthermore, the establishment of a modern and ambitious legislative framework in the health and safety field has not been accompanied by the elaboration and implementation of a national policy for improving working conditions and the working environment vested with the necessary financial resources - particularly in the fields of technical and vocational training, education, research and information.

Although the employers' and workers' organisations have recently proved to be more active than they have been in the past - they decided at the beginning of the 1990s, for example, to set up a Joint Institute for Health and Safety at Work, vested with considerable resources - they are nevertheless unable to raise the awareness of their members or to train and mobilise them in the fight against occupational hazards. What is more, the participation machinery which has been established by the legislator in the health and safety field over the past 15 years is having difficulty in operating properly both in undertakings and in regional and national bodies, since the persons concerned are proving to be indifferent and unconvinced of its usefulness.

Recent surveys have shown that in order to implement the new institutional framework a large number of corporate managers (400 000) and worker representatives on health and safety committees (more than 500 000) need to be trained urgently and a considerable number of specialists are also needed (an estimated 2 500 safety engineers and 850 industrial physicians). However, since appropriate awareness-raising measures are lacking, training for employers and workers' representatives has been limited hitherto to the organisation of a few sporadic seminars. And as far as specialists are concerned there is a very serious shortage: the country only has some 30 industrial physicians with the proper specialisation,

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¹ Cf. *TUTB Newsletter* no. 13, March 2000, pp. 6-12.

and there are less than 70 undertakings with a qualified safety engineer.

After an unfortunate attempt at decentralisation, which was fortunately short-lived (1994-1999), and which only aggravated the endemic problems of the Greek labour inspectorate, the recent action by the Ministry of Labour to take over the external services of the labour inspectorate and to set up a national body of labour inspectors comprising an adequate number of technical and social inspectors demonstrates the State's will to apply social legislation effectively. However, improving the efficiency of the labour inspectorate will require a great deal more than the promulgation of a law. It calls, *inter alia*, for a break with the improvisations of the past, action to make the new status of the labour inspectorate a reality that is unanimously recognised and respected, measures to develop the programming of that body's activities and steps to establish an ambitious and coherent programme of training and further training for its executive officers. In parallel, steps will need to be taken to promote the creation of external services for protection and the prevention of occupational hazards - services which are as yet inexistent - that can help small and medium-sized enterprises, which form the vast majority of undertakings in Greece. And finally, action will have to be taken to considerably strengthen the coordination of the activities of the public services concerned, whether in the field of the labour inspectorate, the national social insurance scheme, or the preventive action of the Ministry of Health.

The survey which has just been published points out that the years that lie ahead will be decisive for the success of the efforts to be deployed in order to apply the standards and principles laid down in the new institutional framework in everyday practice. In view of the scale and complexity of the task, the active and informed participation of the trade unions, employers, various specialists and representatives of civil society will be more necessary than ever. ■