

Marc Sapir: “An institute in the bridge-building business”



On 1 April this year, the TUTB became the Health and Safety Department of the European Trade Union Institute for Research, Education and Health and Safety (ETUI-REHS) following the merger of the European Trade Union Confederation's three trade union institutes. The founder and Director of the TUTB, Marc Sapir, is now the new institute's Managing Director, but keeps his place at the helm of the department tasked with monitoring European health and safety at work policies. We look at the new institute, its challenges and its ambitions, and talk to the man in charge.

What was behind the merger?

All the existing institutes had been set up by trade union bodies that were members of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). So they were separate organizations, but with the same people sitting on the policy bodies. They had for some time been pointing out the need to work more closely together and to generate synergies. The ETUC's responsibilities for helping to move Community policies on are expanding, especially as a party in the Social Dialogue. So it needed expertise and means by which to help it keep tabs on the debates and be involved in negotiating agreements. That meant improving the linkages between the three institutes it had set up. The process was precipitated in recent months by administrative considerations around the conditions on which subsidies are granted.

How will you knit together three legacy departments of trade union institutes with different histories, specialties and networks?

Even before the new institute was founded on 1 April, department researchers and trainers were already working together on Social Dialogue issues, which is a core area for the ETUC. There are currently social partner consultations under way on health and safety at work issues, for instance, so inter-departmental exchanges go on, especially on working out responses with ETUC Secretariat policy officers. Ditto for discussions with employers, especially on the recent agreements on teleworking and stress, and the current consultation on violence at work. The different specialists that keep these issues under review from different angles, areas of expertise and networks in each department have been pulled together.

Another case in point is the debate around European Works Councils. The Health and Safety Department lacks the resources to actually set up activities, so instead leverages its experience by taking part in and giving input to different training and expertise activities of the committees and workers' reps on them. I could cite other instances of cooperation

with trainers. Joint initiatives have been developed in the past, especially with the old trade union college (ex ETUCO) on trade unionist training in European health and safety at work issues to enable industry and inter-industry unions to act in this area.

Another example of cooperation is the documentary resources of the two former institutes, which have been jointly managed for several years already, notably via *Labourline*, the online consultable catalogue of publications.

What net benefit do you expect the new institute to deliver for the national trade unions and industry federations affiliated to the ETUC?

Let's take one example, the issues around European Central Bank monetary policy. Through training agencies and different information resources, the new institute could give a bigger impetus to knowledge sharing and the debate within and between unions.

I tend to think that European processes where linkages exist with the national level, like the Social Dialogue, the sectoral Social Dialogue, and works councils, are where the new institute can deliver the biggest net benefit by throwing bridges between the European and national levels of work, bringing a whole string of people together. Metaphorically-speaking, you could say that the institute is in the bridge-building business.

How can the new institute argue for workers with the present gloomy outlook for Europe, especially on the social front?

The key player there is still the ETUC and its member organizations. But the new institute can step into the debate by helping unions to pull their strategies and objectives together, by working out the tools needed for trade union development. Building a social Europe depends on what the workers can do to act. We can help them build the bridge, but they have to cross it themselves.

Is there a danger of the influence and specific message of the old TUTB getting watered down in this new set-up?

I'm not worried about that for two good reasons. One is the specific expertise of the staff, which enables them to come at European issues from both a social and technical angle. The staff are still on board and still working on health and safety at work issues.

The other is the recognition gained at both European and national level of workers' right to representation in health and safety. That right has been won after a long struggle by workers to prevent their health and safety being dictated by market forces, and is a fundamental framework that I don't see as directly under threat, although the spread of job insecurity is making it harder to exercise.

The choice was made to frame some aspects of health and safety policy at Community level. To ensure dialogue between the European and national levels, you have to be able to bring different disciplines, experiences and expertise face to face. This is a multidisciplinary job, needing people with scientific knowledge who can also translate workers' demands into technical health and safety at work terms.

You established the TUTB in 1989 and headed it for over fifteen years. What's your view, looking back?

The TUTB was set up fifteen years ago to support the trade unions in the European process of laying down rules, technical standards and legislation on safety and health protection. We didn't have a crystal ball, so we couldn't predict back then the situation we now find ourselves in, not least the reunification of Europe, the rapid pace of technological changes and their impact on work and jobs. I wouldn't want to hype up our achievements and abilities to negotiate these technical changes, and I also have to say that building up a common technical prevention culture is a very slow job. It's no easy thing to be involved in building a technical consensus because trade union participation in the process is extremely limited and difficult.

That is why we have gradually shifted our focus to more specific projects, and developed model schemes, but always with a structural, medium-term approach of trying to influence the way work is done at European level on issues that affect workers' safety and health. We tried to develop an approach with trade unions, obviously, but also with others players at national level. We have widened the field of partners.

The TUTB experience remains a one-off anywhere. This kind of attempt by trade union experts to influence the design of work technologies and equipment is not found anywhere else in the world. I believe we still have a lot to learn from it. Linkages have to be created between plant-level knowledge and European work if European integration is not just to be a managerial tick-

box exercise, or one that aims only to guarantee the smooth running of the market. The concept of a workers' expert means two things to us. It is about the commitment of our staff, who don't confuse technical and scientific expertise with fence-sitting. Also, when setting our priorities and in our working methods, the collective experience of workers and their trade unions is both an indispensable source of knowledge, and the main benchmark for what we do.

We did major pioneering work on the OSH regulations front, producing the first reports on the practical implementation of the directives. The TUTB was the first to produce reports and call the Commission to account over where certain instruments fell short, always taking care to feed the practical problems encountered by workers in the workplace back up to the European institutions. This is something we have to do, and is central in a trade union approach. The linkage between the European and national levels was always an abiding concern for the TUTB. ■

Interview by **Denis Grégoire**, ETUI-REHS
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ETUI-REHS : one institute, three departments

■ Research

The Research Department of the ETUI-REHS focuses on socio-economic issues and industrial relations. As a link between the European trade union movement and academia, it conducts and promotes research on topics of strategic importance for the world of labour: the world of labour and the modernisation of trade unions ; the Europeanisation of workers' representation ; European employment and social policies.

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■ Education

The Education Department provides the ETUC and its affiliated organisations with a European education and training service. It coordinates Europe-level courses which enable trade union officers and representatives from all over Europe to take part in a unique European learning experience - acquiring new information, developing new skills, sharing European trade union values and gaining a broader European perspective on trade union issues.

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■ Health and Safety

The Health and Safety Department keeps the drafting, transposition and application of European health and safety at work legislation under close review. It has set up an Observatory on the application of the European directives. It carries out ongoing research into fields like risk assessment, the organisation of prevention, the gender dimension in workplace health, the participatory design of work equipment, asbestos, stress, and violence in the workplace.

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