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EDITORIAL

Commission must take responsibility for tackling MSDs

The findings of the last European working conditions survey highlight a long-running trend: the collection of work-related medical conditions that affects most workers in Europe is that of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs). Work accident frequency rates may be going down, partly at least due to job-shedding in some sectors of industry, but the suffering, work incapacity and forms of disability related to MSDs evidence the relatively unimpressive delivery of prevention policies in this field. Almost a quarter of workers complain of backache. Muscle pains, fatigue and stress are reported by just over 22% of workers. National working conditions surveys tell much the same story.

These figures are evidence that the conditions of work intensification are wreaking havoc with workers' health. Trade unions have for years been arguing that MSDs are symptoms of a work organisation imposed by company management. Employers, by contrast, try to play down the problem, branding it a societal issue due to poor lifestyle choices. Their obdurate stonewalling of any European legislation in this field has so far paid off: the Commission has never yet put up a concrete proposal for a directive, despite it being set as a priority for the Community strategy 2002-2006. The credibility of Community health at work policy will be badly dented if the Commission continues to shirk its responsibilities and does not come rapidly forward with a coherent and ambitious proposal for a Directive to prevent MSDs.

The European surveys show up the inconsistency and disingenuousness of the employers' arguments. They reveal a very close link between the development of MSDs and some kinds of work organisation. The Dublin Foundation survey shows that the closest link between a given set of working conditions and a group of health outcomes is specifically shown by back problems. The link between physically demanding work and these medical conditions is even closer than that between exposure to chemical hazards and breathing difficulties.

MSDs therefore contribute significantly to social inequalities of health, and the more rapidly-worsening health conditions for the worst-exploited groups. It is a lifelong decline with grievous consequences for the quality of life of ageing workers and the retirement age population. It is on the cards that young workers currently exposed to harmful working conditions will become worn-out before their time, suffering from MSDs in the not too distant future.

Despite what the employers' side may say, the knowledge is already there to enable much more effective prevention. There is no need for new studies to get the knowledge required. The claims about scientific uncertainties are just an excuse for doing nothing. Nor is the cost of preventive measures in the frame as the main obstacle. Effective prevention of MSDs would clearly be good for society by reducing spending on health systems and social security that currently bear most of the costs "outsourced" by business. The costs to companies could be written off, anyway. The real reason for employers' hostility likely lies elsewhere. It is all about power in the workplace. There is a direct link between MSDs and workers' lack of control over their working conditions. The jobs and sectors where that control is lowest are where bodies are forced into postures and movements that ultimately stop them working normally. Work intensity, monotonous and repetitive work, psychological pressures, the failure to really consult workers on work organisation are all factors that contribute to MSDs.

The campaign against MSDs being run by the unions is also about democracy in the workplace, therefore. Healthy work is part and parcel of work where the workers gradually acquire a large span of control over the organisation and content of what they do. ■

Marc Sapir,

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THE HEALTH AND SAFETY DEPARTMENT OF THE EUROPEAN TRADE UNION INSTITUTE – RESEARCH, EDUCATION, HEALTH AND SAFETY (ETUI-REHS) aims at promoting high standards of health and safety at the workplace throughout Europe. It succeeds the former European Trade Union Technical Bureau (TUTB), founded in 1989 by the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). It provides support and expertise to the ETUC and the Workers' Group of the Advisory Committee on Safety, Hygiene and Health Protection at Work. It is an associate member of the European Committee for Standardization (CEN). It coordinates networks of trade union experts in the fields of standardization (safety of machinery) and chemicals (classification of hazardous substances and setting occupational exposure limits).

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