Europe slipping on health and safety

Working conditions in Europe have deteriorated over the past ten years, while EU policy on occupational health and safety has slowed down. New initiatives are planned for 2002-2006. But will they live up to workers’ expectations?

Anne Renaut
Journalist
Specialist on European social issues

Accelerated work rhythms, more flexible jobs and hours, greater exposure to physical hazards – working conditions in the European Union (EU) have deteriorated since 1990. So, at least, says a survey by the European Foundation in Dublin1.

Certainly, the number of workers who believe that they are exposed to occupational health and safety risks decreased between 1990 and 2000 (27 per cent in 2000, as against 30 per cent in 1990 and 28 per cent in 1995). But a growing proportion of workers report work-related health problems. Thus, 33 per cent of workers complained of backache in 2000, as against 30 per cent in 1995, and 23 per cent noted general fatigue (20 per cent in 1995). 28 per cent of workers are still suffering from stress, while 15 per cent have headaches (13 per cent in 1995).

And more European workers now say that they are exposed to such hazards as noise, temperature, pollution, vibrations, heavy loads or painful postures.

The European Foundation’s study notes that 37 per cent of workers claimed to be handling heavy loads in 2000, a rise of six per cent since 1990. It also says that 47 per cent of workers were subject to intense noise (up 4 per cent from 1990), and that 29 per cent of employees have to work amidst intense noise (up 2 per cent from 1990).

Speed-ups and flexibility
Marked by high work rates and tight deadlines, the intensification of work accelerated, especially between 1990 and 1995, but also between 1995 and 2000. At the same time, the nature of work within the EU changed. Work rhythms are now
governed more by market constraints and external demands from customers and colleagues than by production norms or hierarchical control.

Repetitive work is still widespread (57 per cent of workers complained of this in 2000, the same figure as in 1995). Workers whose jobs entail repetitive actions are more prone to musculo-skeletal disorders than are other workers.

Another factor in the decline of working conditions is flexibility, as regards both work times and the organization of work and employment. All-week, round-the-clock operation is becoming more common. This flexibility means irregular weekly working hours for 24 per cent of workers and irregular working days for 41 per cent. For 19 per cent of workers, this situation sometimes conflicts with family and social commitments.

Flexibility also affects the organization of work, as regards multi-tasking, shift work and responsibilities.

Employment, too, is becoming flexible. Non-standard contracts, temping and subcontracting are all the rage. And temporary workers are more exposed to physical hazards, high work intensities and high work speeds than are permanent workers. More than 50 per cent of temporary workers say that they work in uncomfortable postures, as against 46 per cent of those on fixed-term employment contracts and 45 per cent of those on permanent contracts. Over a third of temporary workers (35 per cent) suffer from noise, compared with 27 per cent on fixed-term contracts and 30 per cent on permanent contracts.

**Invisible risks**

Violence and harassment at the workplace are still major problems. In 2000, 9 per cent of workers complained of intimidation, as against 8 per cent in 1995, but this varies greatly from one country to another, and the researchers suppose that the figures do not show the full extent of the problem.

“Occupational risks have become invisible,” Marc Sapir insists. He is the Director of the Trade Union Technical Bureau (TUTB), an occupational health and safety
institute set up by the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). A big question, Sapirov says, is whether laws drawn up to tackle the traditional risks of the industrial era are still relevant today.

“In the ‘70s,” he points out, “the aim was to protect specialized workers on production lines. There was a whole series of responses to that, using participative, ergonomic approaches. Whereas these days, workers in Europe have far more responsibilities. They approve of that, but it does also mean enormous pressure – for instance, as regards performance targets.” Such stress is found particularly in the new jobs in the tertiary sector.

A question mark also hangs over the future of Europe’s social protection systems, in view of its ageing population. “But if people’s working lives have to be prolonged in order to finance social security, then the quality of employment must be improved,” Sapirov emphasizes.

Women are not immune from bad working conditions – quite the contrary. Fewer women than men hold positions of responsibility. Women are paid less than men in identical posts. More women are in precarious employment, with repetitive tasks and greater requirements of availability and flexibility. Women’s work is all the more arduous because they do most of the cooking (women: 64 per cent; men: 13 per cent) and the childcare (women: 41 per cent; men: 24 per cent). Occupational health and equality unite in the ETUC’s call for a revision of the 1992 EU directive on maternity – and in particular for maternity leave to be extended from 14 to 20 weeks. Directives have the force of law in all EU member states.

Officially, the number of work accidents is not increasing, but there is a statistical problem here, because the only accidents or diseases that are recorded as such are those covered by compensation funds. This means that under-reporting of accidents is very high in many countries. The same difficulty applies to the figures for absenteeism and invalidity.
Nonetheless, Eurostat records some five million work accidents each year. Of these, 5,500 are fatal (1998 figures) and 10,000 result in handicaps that prevent any resumption of work.

The highest-risk sectors are fisheries, construction and agriculture, and the workers most at risk are the young (between 18 and 24 years of age, the risk of an accident is 40 per cent above average) and older people (beyond age 65, the risk of a fatal accident is 62 per cent higher than the average for 55- to 64-year-olds).

Moreover, work injuries and accidents are expensive. According to the European Commission, 500 million working days are lost each year through accidents or illness. That is sixty times more days lost than through strikes or industrial disputes.

**Not a priority for the EU**

However, since 1992, EU initiatives have been marking time. That, at least, is the view of the ETUC which denounces, on the one hand, the campaigns conducted by the employers and, on the other, a weakening of the resources that the European Commission devotes to this issue. The Union of Industrial and Employers’ Confederations of Europe (Unice) believes that the EU’s “legislative framework is in place” and that it covers all known hazards.

And yet the EU’s basic treaties set a more ambitious objective in this field than the mere convergence of national policies. The aim is to harmonize laws. “Occupational health is no longer seen as a priority,” the ETUC feels, and “the Commission seems to have given up any idea of guiding the process politically.”

Moreover, in the EU member states, the transposition of the EU directives into national law has merely brought about a few adjustments, except in Spain and Italy, which seem to have opted for a thorough overhaul. This impression is confirmed by a recent ruling of the European Court of Justice which for the first time, on 15 November 2001, found against a member state on the grounds of inadequate and incomplete transposition of the contents of the June 1989 framework directive, which deals with the whole issue of occupational health and safety.
Trade unions, meanwhile, have mobilized in a number of EU countries, putting the quality of working conditions and national prevention policies back on the agenda.

In France, it was the asbestos affair that brought the issue back into the limelight. For decades, the French government underestimated the dangers of asbestos. Then, in 1996, it banned its use. This showed up the inadequacies of the prevention system.

The coherence of the prevention system also became a matter for debate in Italy, which faced an increase in the number of declared occupational accidents and dysfunctions in the relevant paritary bodies. So, in September 2000 in Modena, the unions organized the first national assembly of worker health and safety reps. On 20 October 2000, a work stoppage was held in support of health and safety.

In Spain, where the workplace accident statistics are just as dramatic, two general strikes were held in the construction sector in February 2000 and March 2001, and a national action plan was developed, with trade union involvement, in the sectors concerned.

In the United Kingdom, a series of disasters at sea (Piper Alpha and the capsizing of the Herald of Free Enterprise off Zeebrugge, for instance), in public health (such as the epidemic of bovine spongiform encephalitis (BSE), better known as “mad cow disease”) and on the railways (for example, at Paddington) demonstrated the failings of an approach that favours self-regulation by employers combined with a weakening of public control and of social checks and balances.

In Sweden, the trade unions campaigned for proper account to be taken of health and safety in small and medium-scale enterprises, where the risks are higher than in big firms.

Completing harmonization

In this context, the ETUC believes that harmonization must be completed on the basis of the fundamental principles set out in the framework directive of June 1989. The ETUC emphasizes the importance of the ILO Conventions in this regard, notably No. 155 (on worker safety and health, 1981) and No. 161 (on occupational health services,
1985), and advocates “more systematic cooperation” with the ILO. Unfortunately, few of the EU countries have ratified these Conventions. Only eight European states are signed up to Convention 155, and just three to Convention 161.

The unions particularly deplore the inability to adopt a directive on physical hazards as a whole. Instead, the EU adopted a common position solely on the issue of vibrations. The unions are calling for a revision of the 1986 directive on noise, and notably for more stringent threshold limit values.

On chemical hazards, the trade unions denounce the delay in adopting the 1998 directive. They regard this directive as inadequate. They are calling for a speed-up in the setting of EU-wide threshold limit values, for the protection of all workers against carcinogens, and for a revision of the 1983 directive on asbestos.

Concerning the organization of work, the ETUC wants the maximum working week reduced from 48 hours to 44 and an end to member states’ right to grant individual waivers outside of any collective agreements.

On new hazards, the ETUC demands an overall directive on ergonomic problems, with particular attention to musculo-skeletal disorders, as well as action programmes on issues such as stress and moral harassment.

Finally, the ETUC wants the scope of the directives to be extended, before 2004, to self-employed workers, domestic workers and workers in small and medium-size enterprises, who are more exposed than those in large companies.

On prevention services, such as occupational medicine, the main union demand is for the ratification of ILO Convention 161 and the establishment, in 2002, of common guidelines for improving the coverage of workers.

**Pointers but no programme**

While recognizing the specificity of occupational health and safety, the ETUC also suggests that this dimension should be brought into other EU policies.
The unions also want the rules governing the internal market to take better account of occupational safety requirements, with effective monitoring systems for the market in workplace equipment and chemical preparations and better trade union participation in technical standardization work.

On employment, one particular call from the ETUC is for preventive measures to be evaluated in relation to the normal full span of a working life. In other words, working conditions should be considered acceptable only if they enable people to stay at work right up to retirement age. The ETUC also opposes selection on the basis of a worker’s state of health and advocates the integration of handicapped people into the workplace.

As regards social protection, the conditions for the recognition of occupational diseases should be harmonized. But the ETUC speaks of an “obvious failure” on this. Currently, the occupational diseases that are recorded and recognized as such differ from country to country. This causes serious inequalities in the payment of compensation by national social insurance bodies.

True, the EU is now at last launching a new occupational health and safety strategy for 2002-2006. The strategy document seeks to promote “decent work”, based on an ILO concept, and develops a global approach which takes account of new hazards. It also stresses the need for a “culture of prevention”. Yet this is a strategic document, whereas the unions want “a programme and not just pointers”. The ETUC warns against the dangers of a quantitative approach to national objectives as proposed by the Commission since this could lead to distortions. Thus, reducing the number of workplace accidents could mean, at the same time, reducing the coverage of them. The Commission also plans to integrate in its guidelines on employment for 2003, reference to the problems of stress. Stress will also be on the agenda of EU consultations with social partners and will be at the centre of a fully-fledged occupational health and safety campaign in 2002. Practical guidelines to implement EU Directives on health and safety, improvement to existing legislation on musculo-skeletal diseases and a new Directive on mobbing and violence at work are in preparation.
In November 2001, EU Social Affairs Commissioner Anna Diamantopoulu spoke about this strategy, which would favour “good practice” by enterprises on the basis of “voluntarism” and “tailored solutions” and would develop a “prevention culture” through training and education. The Commission also intends to ensure that member states implement the directives properly, particularly as regards small and medium-scale enterprises.

Meanwhile, the European Occupational Safety and Health Agency in Bilbao\(^5\) will be organizing a new campaign in 2002 – this time on “stress”. It will also be raising awareness of the dangers in the fishing industry, where the risk of accidents is 2.4 times higher than the European average across all sectors.

As the EU will expand to include some 25 countries over the next few years, the Commission warns of the risk of “social dumping” in the field of health and safety.

Certainly, many more workers in the candidate countries perceive health and safety hazards in their workplaces (42 per cent, as against 27 per cent in the EU) and work-related health problems (41 per cent complain of general fatigue, as against 23 per cent in the EU) according to the first findings of a survey by the Dublin Foundation\(^6\). So the trade unions want an EU fund to be created for the improvement of the working environment, and they insist that the conditions for transposing directives into national law should be identical for the candidate countries.

[footnotes]

1. In 2000, the Dublin-based European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions conducted its third survey on working conditions in the European Union. The previous two were in 1995 and 1990. 21,500 people were questioned – 1,500 in each member state except Luxembourg, where 500 people took part.

2. Sécurité et santé au travail, une priorité pour les employeurs, Unice, August 2000
3 *Pour une relance de la politique communautaire en santé au travail*, ETUC and TUTB, June 2001.


5 See the agency’s site at http://europe.osha.eu.int

6 In 2001, the Dublin Foundation conducted the same survey on working conditions in the 12 countries that are candidates for EU membership. The results will be published at the end of 2002.