

Editorial

Be happy – you've been consulted

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Despite pressing calls from Parliament, unions, the Luxembourg Advisory Committee and other stakeholders the Commission has not budged. As of late September, there is no sign of any firm plans for a European health and safety at work strategy. This delay will leave a dark legacy. National strategising in many countries of the European Union is done on the basis of a common European framework. The message sent out is that workers' health is not on the priority list.

The European Commission's resolute inertia comes despite Parliament's calls for a new strategy. All political groups in the EP voiced their dissatisfaction on 12 September after calling Social Affairs Commissioner László Andor to account. A series of calls to order were voted through unanimously by governments, employers' organizations and trade unions in the tripartite committee that keeps these matters under review. Sadly, occupational health is not the only area where the Commission treats Parliament in such a cavalier fashion. The EP's call for Community legislation on corporate restructurings met with a point blank refusal from the Commission without even bothering to give reasons.

Instead of policy-making, the Commission has gone with a communication exercise, setting up a website to run a summer-long wide-ranging public consultation. It reportedly received some 500 responses, 70% of them apparently supporting a new strategy. The bald figures mean little – they could be individuals or organizations with memberships in the millions.

The now-faddish Internet consultations allow views on many things to be collected in no time. The issue is not with the means used. What is questionable is using consultations to put matters off, water down political responsibilities, turn a deaf ear to pressing demands from the European Parliament, the EU's only directly elected institution. There was no reason why the Commission could not have run an Internet consultation in 2011 when it was meant to be framing the strategy.

As its term of office peters out, the Commission is stepping up e-consultations. The highest-profile one is that run by Enterprise Commissioner Antonio Tajani with the snappy title "Top Ten" asking bosses – but not their workers, obviously – of SMEs to point the finger at laws they disliked.

Out of the 20 million-plus SMEs in Europe, just 628 wrote in to the "Top Ten". Adding in firms from elsewhere in the world and some employers' lobbies brought the total submissions up to 1 000. Most countries could not even raise a score of responses. For a three-month consultation available in 21 languages with a hefty advertising budget, that ranks as a total shambles.

The questions were slanted, too, in that most could only be answered in the negative.

Unsurprisingly, taxation was the top gripe of some SMEs who took part in this farce. They also dislike having to process waste and inform consumers by labelling products. The obligation to ensure that chemicals are safe ranked seventh on the "hate-list" just ahead of health and safety at work. Among specific laws, REACH is the greatest evil, while for occupational health, "public enemy number one" is the directive limiting the working week to 48 hours.

Any serious polling organisation would have scrapped these results due to leading questions, too few replies to constitute a representative sample, etc. Not the Commission, which has turned them into irrefutable evidence. A raft of official documents now carry its claims to have identified the most vexing laws. The "Top Ten" has become a gospel truth propounded in one document after another with never a mention of its iffy origin.

It is like the mirror in the fairytale of *Snow White* which the wicked Queen asks: "Who is the fairest of them all?" clearly expecting the reply, "My Queen, you are the fairest in the land". When the mirror replies that Snow White is more beautiful, the consultation ends and the evil begins. The "Top Ten" survey is used to proclaim "Mr Barroso,

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small employers in these 28 countries love your deregulation agenda". A shame that no-one considered consulting the populations of the countries subject to the diktats of the troika, a body that has no legitimacy with which the Commission is contributing to a roll-back in employment standards of the utmost savagery with a complete lack of accountability.

Rising social inequalities do not square with a meaningful democracy. How can the average European have an active say in public life if in every aspect of their lives all they are entitled to is a vanishingly small share of what the privileged few monopolise? That is something you might care to ask the candidates asking for your vote in the upcoming elections for the European Parliament. What plans have they got to reduce inequalities, to build a social Europe, and to improve working conditions? ●