

Editorial

230 000 lives sacrificed to industry lobbying?

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On 10 January 2017, the European Commission submitted the second proposal to revise the Directive on protecting workers from carcinogens. Workers were in for an unpleasant surprise: instead of the 12 substances expected, the Commission proposed occupational exposure limit values for only five new carcinogens.

The crux of the matter is not the number, however, it is the choice of substances. For this second list, industry lobbying has focused on one objective: to avoid any regulation of diesel exhaust at work.

The Commission heard the industry loud and clear (read the article p. 6), omitting to include these emissions in the Directive, and thereby omitting to protect the three million or so EU workers who are exposed to them at work. If working life as a whole is considered, the total number of workers exposed during part of their career would amount to 12 million in 2010 and could rise to 20 million by 2060.

The carcinogenic nature of diesel exhaust has been established by a great deal of research. In 2012, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (the IARC, part of the World Health Organisation) recognised such emissions as carcinogenic to humans, while previously they had been considered as probably carcinogenic.

Following the publication of the IARC report, the industry did its best to cast doubt using the slick approach it followed for asbestos, lead and tobacco smoke. According to the industry, new diesel engine exhaust would pose far fewer problems for workers' health than that produced by older models. In short, lung cancers due to exposure to diesel exhaust at work would be a thing of the past. The tactic is crude: since there is a

long latency period between exposure and the cancers caused, we will have to wait 40 or 50 years for the epidemiological studies concerning populations exposed exclusively to emissions from the most recent engines.

The Commission was careful not to refer explicitly to the stance taken by the industry. In its impact study, it provides a technical legal argument, claiming that it was not possible to find a satisfactory legal definition distinguishing exhaust from newer engines from exhaust from old engines.

This argument is irrelevant both from the legal and the scientific perspective.

The Directive at issue does not set out any specific obligation regarding the purchase of diesel engines. That is not its purpose. What it does do is define a range of prevention measures. It is entirely superfluous to define diesel engine exhaust by referring to the year the engines were built.

Scientific data show that diesel engines operating in workplaces use a variety of technologies. Several different generations of equipment can be found. It would be ridiculous to try to separate emissions from some from emissions from others. The chemical composition of the emissions also varies in accordance with many parameters. What characterises all emissions is the presence of ultra-fine particulates which enter the pulmonary tract and are associated with different pathologies, such as respiratory diseases, lung cancers or cardiovascular problems. The level of emissions and their chemical composition, meanwhile, do not depend solely on the year of construction of the engines. Maintenance, cleaning, filter systems and combustion temperature are also important factors.

The Commission itself points out that, in the absence of legislative action, there will

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be 230 000 deaths from lung cancer among exposed workers in Europe. This calculation relates to the period from 2010 to 2069. Any delay will be reflected in thousands of avoidable deaths.

The question of diesel illustrates the double standards applied in community policies. If 230 000 deaths linked to a food safety, water quality or air safety problem were foreseen, community legislative action would be taken much more rapidly, yet when it is a matter of protecting the workplace from cancers, anything goes to ensure progress at a snail's pace.

The European Parliament and the Council of Ministers will take the final decision in the coming months. An important battle will therefore have to be waged to create a balance of power that will overcome the barriers raised by the Commission and industry lobbying. ●