

# Editorial

## 100 000 work cancer deaths: time for action!

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The former head of the EU's Safety and Health at Work Agency Jukka Takala has sounded a wake-up call: cancers induced by working conditions kill over 100 000 people in the European Union each year. Cancers account for 53% of work-related deaths compared to just 2% for work accidents. Every one of these deaths can be prevented.

To do away with workplace cancers, there must be a stronger framework of laws, more checks by health and safety inspectors, and no let-up in union action to get human life valued more than company profits.

Mr Barroso's ten-year stint as the Commission's top man has brought EU health and safety at work policy grinding to a halt. A majority of Member States now want to stir the Commission from its inaction, pointing not only to the immense suffering these 100 000 deaths represent, but also to the rising costs to public health and social security budgets. Businesses are able to shift the costs onto society because it can take two decades or more between a worker being exposed to carcinogens and the disease starting to manifest. Not many cancers get recognized as occupational diseases. The risk of prosecution is low, as can be seen from the acquittal of Swiss billionaire Stephan Schmidheiny by Italy's Supreme Appeal Court on 19 November 2014. The judges acknowledged that the multinational Eternit wilfully sacrificed the lives of more than 3 000 people in Italy, but acquitted the company head because the statute of limitations had run out.

On 4 March 2014, the German, Austrian, Belgian and Dutch Labour Ministers sent a joint letter to the Commission calling for an urgent review of the Directive on exposure to carcinogens and mutagens at work and making specific proposals. The current legislation, based on scientific evidence dating back forty years, has manifestly failed to deliver effective prevention. Its exposure limit values cover less than 20% of real-life situations of

exposure to workplace carcinogens. It does not cover crystalline silica, diesel fumes or dozens of other agents that cause cancers in workers. Nor does it cover reprotoxins.

In December 2014, a large majority of Member States demanded Community policy initiatives on endocrine disruptors. In late January 2015, the EU's Council of Ministers took the unprecedented step of joining Sweden in taking the Commission to court for not keeping to the prescribed deadline for setting criteria to identify endocrine disruptors in pesticides.

Endocrine disruptors are just as concerning as carcinogens, being involved in a sharply rising range of cancers like breast cancer in women and prostate cancer in men. They increase the risk of certain cancers in children whose parents were exposed during their work. A European policy has big added value where both carcinogens and endocrine disruptors are concerned. For prevention to be effective there must be a comprehensive strategy covering the internal market, environmental protection, worker protection, public health, scientific research and technological innovation. It is the very essence of the Community's purview. For the Commission to yield to the pressures of industry puts public health at risk.

Only the Commission can propose new laws. The EU's institutional set-up means

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that MEPs cannot table draft legislation. The Commission is abusing its prerogatives by refusing to put proposals for a directive to Parliament and Council, thereby frustrating any possible policy discussion.

The new Commission President, Jean-Claude Juncker, has made things worse. Policy decisions are snarled up in a paper-chase system. Now, even before being coming up for discussion by the Commission as a body, any proposal for legislation on occupational cancers must get the nod from Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis, who has the eurozone and social dialogue portfolios, and better regulation tsar Vice-President Frans Timmermans. Every hurdle creates a new opportunity for industrial lobbies to block it.

Political pundits say that the first 100 days of a political team are a crucial litmus test of its credibility. The slow-moving European decision-making process stretches that time-frame out to about twelve months, meaning that legislative initiatives could be expected from the Commission sometime in 2015. What the EU does about work cancers will be the main credibility test for its health and safety at work policies. The unions will not be standing idly by. Throughout the year, they will be organizing action to demand appropriate legislation and to roll out workers' initiatives in support of prevention that works. ●