

ETUI seminar on nanotechnology

The European Trade Union Institute's (ETUI) Education and Health and Safety Departments co-hosted a seminar on '*Nanotechnology: national and European trade union strategy*' in Brussels from 19 to 22 October 2010.

This was a unique kind of seminar for the trade union movement. By combining training sessions informed by input from different subject specialists and the European Commission with work on developing the European trade union strategy that will become an ETUC resolution on the topic, it gave participants an overview of both the current technical and policy situation in Europe.

A trade union perspective was brought by representatives from the Spanish Trade Union Institute of Work, Environment and Health (ISTAS) and the French trade union confederation CFDT, who described the general policy picture in their respective countries and their specific trade union actions. ISTAS outlined its trade union training and publications, while CFDT discussed the French national debate on nanotechnology. This gave participants the opportunity to weigh the pros and cons of each approach.

With 16 seminar participants from 14 different European countries* plus a representative from the European Federation of Building and Woodworkers (EFBWW), each attendee was given the chance to talk about their work and the current situation of nanotechnology policy in their organisations. All stressed how urgent the needs were.

One concern identified was the different areas where workers are dealing with nanomaterials unbeknown to them. Workers must as a matter of urgency be told when nanomaterials are being used in workplaces, and informed about the uncertainties and possible risks.

This was illustrated by participants from Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Austria and the EFBWW with examples of union activities and existing publications for trade union use.

The ETUI gave an overview of current regulatory developments in nanotechnology, the stakeholders' agendas, and how standardisation bodies like ISO and CEN are trying to make rapid headway with their work.

The seminar benefited from the scientific expertise of Dr. Antonietta Gatti, Director of Modena University's (Italy) Biomaterials Laboratory on the technical aspects of nanotechnology. She presented a range of evidence showing the presence of nanoparticles in human pathological tissue from individuals with different types of direct and indirect exposure.

Dr. Gatti also presented her work on nano-pathology – an attempt to better understand how the organism reacts to the presence of micro and nano particles. She explained the potential risks of nanoparticles coming into interaction with the cell or nucleus of human tissue. The participants then discussed the application of this scientific data to worker protection.

Dr. Hildo Krop added further to the scientific input, outlining the REACH implementation projects on nanomaterials and substance identification. REACH does not specifically cover nanomaterials, and Hildo Krop described the work being

done to get nanomaterials included in the REACH registration process. He also explained the scientific difference between nano and bulk in terms of the definition of nanomaterials.

A representative from the European Commission's DG Environment, Henrik Laursen, gave the seminar an overview of the EU approach to nanotechnology. He emphasised how it brought innovation, research and competitiveness together, the continuous stimulation of technology development, and the occupational health and safety and environmental aspects.

The Commission representative said that the new EC Action Plan on Nanotechnology 2010-2015 to be unveiled in early 2011 will put innovation and economic development at the forefront of the agenda, along with further engagement with the public.

The seminar heard ETUC Deputy General Secretary Joël Decaillon describe nanotechnology as the new industrial revolution that combines chemical and physical processes which can play into the development of green jobs and the green economy.

Decaillon's message was that trade unions cannot afford to put off action here - it is essential to promote transparency and anticipate change where nanotech is concerned. The trade union movement must get involved, and soon, if it is not to store up big trouble for itself. Decaillon said the first job was to identify exposures and the type of substances being manufactured in nanoforms, singling out the big contradiction between disclosure of substances and business secrecy in the market as it stands.

The trade union movement must keep close tabs on developments, he said, and take the same kind of dynamic participatory approach as with the implementation and use of the REACH regulation.

In their working groups, participants were asked to identify and discuss specific things that might go into the union strategy and future 2nd ETUC Resolution on Nanosciences and Nanotechnology. The definition of nanomaterials, traceability of nanomaterial-containing products and participation in standardisation work were extensively discussed. The participants also considered how unions should implement a national strategy on nanotechnology that takes each country's differences into account.

The trade union strategy needs to organise the information provided to workers. The rules of the regulatory process are now in place and it is up to trade unions to scrutinize them and engage with that process. The key issue for the unions is to have a proactive stance based on precautionary principles, and to embed the social dimensions and personal liberties into the nanotechnology process, with transparency and traceability as key drivers of the trade union strategy.

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*Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Romania, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and Sweden