Editorial

Workplaces are also places where we live

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Most of the adult population spends a large amount of time at work, whether as hours per day, days per week or years of active work. Over and above the actual working hours, work plays an important role in our relations with the world around us: with the people and the things we work with. Work requires us to use our intelligence, our bodies and limbs, our emotions. Work is also an important setting for socialising. Whatever the work, it always involves some form of cooperation, with the work of any one individual part of a wider picture. It is this whole picture that gives the work its sense.

Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and the establishment of specialised workspaces like workshops and factories, in most cases workplaces have been designed as closed spaces, generally subject to company rules and the whims of employers. The struggles to make workplaces healthier and safer revealed the unacceptable side of work back then. The birth of occupational health as a specific discipline in the 19th century saw a form of double standard being established. Public hygiene laws served as a basis for regulating various areas of public health, while the rules adopted for workplace health were often a lot laxer, providing a lower level of protection. Looked at from a liberal perspective, workers’ health rested in the hands of their employers, on a par with keeping machines in good running order or a building in good repair. Even today, the majority of those responsible for workplace health policies in the various countries prefer to rely on voluntary initiatives, on company self-regulation, to preserve the health of workers.

Even now, double standards still exist, with one set of standards protecting people in public spaces, and another – lower – set protecting people at work. These double standards lead to major health inequalities, as workplace risks vary greatly dependent on a worker’s place in the social hierarchy. A recent study conducted in Belgium showed that women and men aged between 30 and 60 working in the cleaning sector have a much higher early mortality rate than that of management staff, due to a great extent to the much higher risk of cancer and lung diseases such as emphysema or chronic bronchitis. While the material factors explaining this situation have been known for a long time, the obstacle in the way of effective prevention is to be found in the high degree of subordination resulting from the systematic use of subcontracting. The whole cleaning sector is geared towards cutting costs – whatever the cost.

A major aspect of today’s debates in Europe about recasting the directive on preventing occupational cancers revolves around this question of double standards (see article on p. 6). The initial proposals put forward by the European Commission were restricted to minimum protection against a very limited number of risks. What was striking in all these debates was the ease with which very high levels of risk were declared acceptable when the people affected were at work. For instance, the limit value for hexavalent chromium corresponded to a risk level of one in ten exposed workers developing lung cancer. Obviously, such risks would not be considered acceptable in any other field of regulation, for instance with regard to food, air or water quality, transport or consumer safety.

This all makes it seem as if the world of work is governed by different rules, much less respectful of human life. And this aspect is not limited to the risk of physical harm to workers. It also concerns their subordination, the obligation for them to kow-tow to a company or supply chain hierarchy and its disciplinary rules. The emergence of the issue of psychosocial risks reveals at what point such work organisation becomes harmful and mutilating.

Fighting for workplace health puts a major question-mark over the brutal dividing line between life at work and life in general. The goal must be to tear down this wall separating work from other human activities, to restructure work to eliminate the distinction between those performing the work and those shaping it, and to reject the double standards between protecting life in general and life at work.

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