

Editorial

Social action is needed to improve occupational health

Laurent Vogel

ETUI

Occupational health is currently under serious pressure from the wider context of the Community policy pompously entitled "Better Regulation". According to this policy, any legislation that protects the health of workers and the general public or the environment comes at too high a cost for business. The solution is therefore seemingly to reduce the levels of protection afforded by European legislation in order to boost economic competitiveness. No meaningful research has ever actually established a causal link between the amount of legislation and the economic situation of businesses. Many other factors come into play, and often have a greater impact. In reality, the "Better Regulation" programme is simply an expression of the austerity policies within the institutional procedures: everything must be subordinate to corporate profits.

As regards occupational health, the Barroso Commission (2004-2014) decided to impose a moratorium on any new legislative initiative, pending a review of the existing legislation. This work was entrusted to a consortium of external consultants.

These consultants completed their report at the beginning of 2015. Overall this report takes the view that the occupational health legislation is necessary and coherent, and that its requirements are reasonable. Some aspects could be usefully amended to make it more effective, whilst others could be added to take account of emerging risks. At the time of writing these lines (October 2015), this report has yet not been published as the European Commission is trying to change it. If this were not a serious matter, it would bring to mind a ventriloquist's act in a circus show. The Commission initially wanted to entrust the review of the directives to independent consultants as a guarantee of objectivity. It now wants them to change their report so that it fits better with the Commission's own policy obsessions. The Secretariat-General, which is responsible for coordination and reports directly to the Commission President, has written a long note in this respect. The

aim is to present a negative image of the legislation so that, based on this independent review, it can then be justifiably challenged.

The Commission's policy position will be adopted towards the end of 2015. It is likely that this document will recommend deregulation in certain areas, although it is currently impossible to predict the extent of this.

Against such a policy background, occupational health will improve only if workers and their organisations take action to ensure this. The question that must be asked is therefore what can we do today to encourage this action for occupational health.

At times of crisis, social action is harder to organise in offensive areas such as the quality of working conditions. However, these obstacles are not insurmountable. The authority of employers is losing its legitimacy. Both the economic crisis and the environmental crisis have shown that neoliberal policies lead to impasses. The dizzying rise in inequality is challenging the productivity-based illusion that, sooner or later, the increased wealth produced will be redistributed and ultimately benefit the entire population.

The same loss of legitimacy is evident in the daily life of businesses. The neoliberal reorganisation of work is harmful to health, and is also ineffective in terms of the quality of work. The search for instant profits that are as high as possible is an intrinsic part of the new management methods. Focused on quantitative indicators, management is becoming increasingly distant from the actual work carried out. The aim of these management methods is to individualise in the extreme an activity that, in its very essence, requires collective cooperation. Throughout Europe, the emergence of damage caused by psychosocial risks is evidence of this crisis.

The need to make work sustainable on a lifelong basis may also help to encourage action on working conditions. Employers consider that, because life expectancy is increasing, we should therefore be working longer. This reasoning ignores the fact that healthy life expectancy is not increasing for the most

Healthy life expectancy is not increasing for the most underprivileged in society, largely due to their conditions of work and employment.

underprivileged in society, largely due to their conditions of work and employment. Without an improvement in those conditions, any rise in the retirement age will result in dramatic situations of exclusion for those workers exposed to the greatest risks. At the other end of the demographic scale, austerity policies have considerably increased job insecurity for the young generations. It is not by chance that, in those countries worst hit by the crisis, it is young people who have initiated the main social actions, such as the "indignants" movement in Spain. In Greece, the "no" to austerity policies expressed during the referendum in July overwhelmingly came from the young generation.

Encouraging action to improve working conditions necessarily requires trade unions to adopt new approaches highlighting the radical and collective nature of occupational health demands. This action will allow immediate improvements to be made in very specific areas and more ambitious plans to be developed for social change. More than ever before, in order to be effective, the advocates of occupational health need to highlight the multiple links between the most fundamental social issues, such as the environment, equality and democracy. ●