

New Challenges in Promoting Health and Safety at Work





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Foreword

In the last two decades the globalisation of production and trade, the increasingly precarious nature of employment, the development of modern information and communication technologies, and the increasing digitisation and robotisation of work practices have resulted in dramatic changes at work, which in turn have entailed new challenges for workers' health and safety. Studies evidence a correlation between modern work organisation and the intensification of stress and bullying at the workplace. In the European Union, today psychosocial factors are the main reason for work-related sickness alongside musculoskeletal problems and chemical hazardous substances.

In its 2015 education and training year, the European Centre for Workers' Questions (EZA) conducted a series of seminars with the aim of developing strategies of action for workers' organisations in the face of the new challenges in health and safety at work. The seminars focused on the following aspects: preventing psychosocial risks, especially work-related stress; applying legislative provisions, particularly in small firms; introducing a gender perspective in the strategies for health and safety at work; promoting job satisfaction. Big differences between the various regions of Europe became apparent in the course of the project series' five seminars.

EZA member centres that have been addressing the issues for some years in their projects were involved in the series of seminars. I would like to thank the project leaders from LDF in Lithuania, Krifa from Denmark, UNASM from the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the Nell-Breuning-Haus in Germany, MOSZ from Hungary and C.F.T.L. from Portugal for their active involvement and special commitment. Most of them had already been involved in a series of projects in the 2005/2006 education and training year on physical hazards at work and in a cycle of seminars in the 2010 education and training year on stress at work.

My special thanks go to António Brandão Guedes, Head of Department at the Portuguese Ministry of Occupational Health, who headed up the project

co-ordination, provided input on content, evaluated the results, and drew up this Final Report. I would also like to thank Paulo Caetano and João Paulo Branco from C.F.T.L., who whilst the results of the co-ordinated projects were being evaluated enabled an Internet forum to be created for interested EZA member centres to discuss the issues further. I also wish to thank Norbert Klein and Matthias Homey, who co-ordinated the content of the activities on the EZA Secretariat side.

Experts from the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) presented its activities at three seminars, providing key input for the entire project series. I offer my sincere thanks to Dr. Dietmar Elsler, the agency's Project Manager in Bilbao, who spoke at the MOSZ seminar in Hungary, as well as the representatives of the agency's Focal Points in Vilnius, Dalius Bitaitis, and in Skopje, Milan Petkovski, for their presentations at the LDF and NBH/UNASM seminars.

Not least because of its contributions to the seminars, EZA will apply to become a partner of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work in the 2016/2017 campaign on "Healthy Workplaces For All Ages".

The European Commission's Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion supported our activities with content and funding.

We hope the results and recommendations for action in this brochure furnish workers' organisations and their multipliers with ideas for their daily work, and would be delighted to receive suggestions and comments on these topical issues of health and safety at work that are so pressing for every worker in Europe.

Sigrid Schraml
Secretary-General EZA

Introduction

The profound transformations occurring in the world of labour in the last three decades – and in particular those due to the introduction of information and communication technologies and the increasing striving for global competitiveness – have led both to the emergence of new occupational risks and to the exacerbation of traditional ones. Among the risks that have increased, we find psychosocial risks – and particularly work-related stress.

Work-related psychosocial risks – such as stress, harassment, mobbing and violence at work – have been considered one of the major contemporary challenges for the health and safety of workers.

Psychosocial risks are currently, on a par with musculoskeletal disorders and exposure to chemical hazards, the main cause of work-related illness and deaths in the European Union.

This reality has been identified and studied both by specialized European agencies – such as the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (OSHA) and the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) – and by European workers' organisations. This has led some of the training centres of the EZA network to organise international seminars on the subject of psychosocial risks. These seminars were integrated in the project co-ordination "New challenges in promoting health and safety at work", supported by EZA and co-ordinated by myself.

The first such seminar was organised by LDF Education Centre (VsI Lithuanian Labour Federation Education Centre) from Lithuania under the title "Moving from precarious employment to decent work: role of the trade unions in preventing harassment and mobbing at work". It took place in Vilnius from 8 to 10 May 2015.

The second seminar was organised by Krifa (Kristelig Fagbevægelse) from Denmark and titled "Pleasure at work: How can pleasure at work be further stimulated and what role can trade unions play?". It took place in Copenhagen from September 16 to 18 September 2015.

The third seminar was organised by NBH (Nell-Breuning-Haus) from Germany in co-operation with YHACM – UNASM – UIATUM (Union of Independent Autonomous Trade Unions of Macedonia), FYR of Macedonia, under the title “Improving health in the world of work with a special focus on the gender perspective - recommended procedures for the social dialogue”. It took place in Ohrid from 12 to 14 October 2015.

The fourth seminar was promoted by MOSZ (Munkástanácsok Országos Szövetsége) from Hungary and titled “More and better jobs with a special focus on health and safety at work”. It took place in Miskolc on 12 and 13 November 2015.

Following in the footsteps of several studies and reports – particularly those of the OSHA and the Strategic Framework of the European Commission for 2014-2020 – the four seminars identified several challenges:

- Raising awareness of the growing presence and consequences of psychosocial risks – especially stress, harassment and bullying - in the world of labour as well as the importance of their prevention
- Enforcing legislation on health and safety, particularly in small enterprises (with Denmark being the exception in this regard)
- Acquisition of competencies relating to psychosocial risks by workers’ organisations, allowing for a more important role of these organisations in preventing such risks
- Including a gender perspective and an equality dimension in the efforts for promoting health and safety at work
- Reaching a minimum level of “happiness at work”.

1 Psychosocial risks

Psychosocial risks are, alongside musculoskeletal disorders, the main causes of work-related illnesses and absenteeism in Europe.

Among these risks, this project gave a special emphasis to stress and moral harassment. The problem of stress was debated in all four seminars, being approached by several experts from different perspectives. Work-related stress is currently one of the major problems faced by firms and public services, giving rise to severe health and family problems, with a consequent decrease in productivity.

In every seminar – and notably in the Lithuanian and Hungarian ones – the causes, symptoms and consequences of psychosocial risks were analysed. Also central to the seminars was the discussion on strategies of prevention from a union perspective. The main conclusions of these seminars were as follows:

- Psychosocial risks are strongly present in both public and private workplaces. In some sectors, these risks have acquired disastrous proportions, with destructive effects for the health of their victims and their families, for healthcare systems and for the economy as a whole.
- Among the main risk factors are the lack of work-life balance and the increase of physical and mental burdens placed on workers by technological and organisational transformations. There are also other cultural elements and lifestyles which contribute to the emergence of psychosocial risks.
- The prevention of psychosocial risks should include both the management system and the plan for prevention and promotion of health and safety at work of the company or service concerned. Internal and external mechanisms for early flagging of signs of stress, harassment and violence should be put in place. It is equally important to articulate the dimension of organisational prevention with measures for supporting victim at an individual level.

- It is well known that companies – and in particular small and medium-sized enterprises – still see prevention measures as a cost item. Most small firms lack union presence or any other structure of workers' representation to deal with questions of health and safety at work. In these cases, prevention is harder, requiring a more active role of public entities both to raise awareness for the problem of psychosocial risks and also to demonstrate that prevention is in fact an investment that yields considerable returns.
- It is also well established that occupational physicians show some difficulties in recognising and diagnosing some occupational illnesses – particularly mental ones. In most countries, health and safety services are external to firms and thus lack proper knowledge of the concrete risks facing workers in their jobs.
- Psychosocial risks should be included in union action, bearing in mind both national specificities and the legislative framework of the European Union.
- It is necessary to prepare union leaders and negotiators to give a proper place to health and safety in collective bargaining processes – both in their tools and their outcomes.
- Workers' organisations should be encouraged to exchange experience and knowledge regarding the development of methodologies in this field.
- It is important to give proper recognition to good practices of firms in the field of health and safety at work. This should encourage firms to develop a healthy organisational culture, one that ascribes an important place to the participation and well-being of workers under the framework of social dialogue. Indeed, social dialogue at different levels – from the European Union to the workplace – fosters awareness of psychosocial risks and the development of policies and measures adequate to each country, company or service.

2 Enforcing health and safety at work

It has been in the field of legislation on health and safety at work that the European Union has achieved some of its most important social advances. Directive 89/391/EEC, also known as “Framework Directive”, is of particular importance in this regard. This piece of legislation was the basis for creating dozens of specific directives on other matters whose transposition at national level is mandatory. Despite these advances, the enforcement of such legislation at company level remains highly problematic – the more so in firms that lack union presence and/or in countries where labour inspection services are weak. This is a challenge that is also recognized in the European Strategy for Safety and Health at Work 2014–2020.

The countries where the seminars were organised provide a diverse picture in this regard. Hungary and Lithuania are still in a phase of transposing European social and labour laws in their own national legislation, while the FYR of Macedonia is not even a member of the EU. By contrast, enforcing highly advanced legislation in these fields is no problem in Denmark. Discussion of these different realities led to the following conclusions:

- It would be important to produce a specific European directive on psychosocial risks that defines duties and obligations in this regard. However, the “Framework Directive” and the European social partners’ agreements on stress (2004) and on harassment and violence at work (2007) already provide effective tools for supporting preventive action in this domain.
- National legislation on the prevention of psychosocial risks can be more clear and complete. In some countries, such as the FYR of Macedonia and Hungary, legislation on this and other matters – such as the prevention of and compensation for work accidents and occupational illnesses – is seriously lacking in aspects such as sanctions or lists of work-related illnesses.
- The role of labour inspections in enforcing legislation, disseminating information and promoting decent work received little attention in the

seminars. This may point to a lack of awareness among participants about these institutions, despite their existence in almost all European countries. In 2012, the Senior Labour Inspectors' Committee (SLIC) organised a campaign on the prevention of psychosocial risks at work targeting several European countries.

3 Promoting health and safety at work from a gender perspective

The integration of a gender perspective in promoting health and safety at work is an important step towards equality between men and women in the world of work. This subject was central in the debates in the Macedonian seminar, being recognized as a relatively recent and innovative approach – even if still playing a secondary role in preventive practices. The conclusions of the seminar include a series of proposals to deal with discrimination and stereotypes regarding the work of women.

- The gender question should be acknowledged in public policy in general and in legislation on health and safety at work in particular. Discrimination should be prevented without ignoring specificities. An all-encompassing approach to safety should also take into account the diversity among women and among men.
- The gender approach should be present across the whole process of promoting health at work, including the identification and assessment of risks and the design of collective and individual preventive measures. The best way to achieve this goal is to promote the participation of women in these processes, namely in identifying and assessing risks, designing ergonomic measures and individual protective equipment (PPE).
- It is necessary to invest in education and training from a gender perspective, be it at school level, in vocational training and in the training of union leaders and workers representatives in safety and health matters.

- The fight against discrimination and the promotion of equality are objectives for all workers' organisations. The growing number of women in unions is an important boosting factor for fulfilling these objectives.

4 Happiness at work as a major challenge

Is it possible to achieve happiness through work? Can satisfaction at work improve personal happiness? Which are the main factors that make one happy at work?

The Danish seminar tried to answer these and other questions by delving into the nefarious consequences of psychosocial risks and by drawing up proposals for promoting satisfaction, well-being and happiness at work. One of the essential missions of Danish unions is to promote workers' health and to create the conditions for work to become an important element for people's material and spiritual fulfilment. I would point out the following as the main conclusions of this seminar:

- Psychosocial risks should be adequately considered in the systems for preventing occupational risks, owing to the fact that they are strong obstacles to the happiness and health of workers.
- Appropriate safety conditions, health and wages are necessary but not sufficient for satisfaction at work. It is also necessary to invest in other factors, such as working environment, goals, relationships with colleagues and management, and life-work balance.
- Technological advances have an ambivalent effect in this regard. They may contribute to satisfaction at work but also hinder it.
- Unions have an important role in the promoting the well-being and happiness of workers. Aside from bargaining and negotiation, unions may devise and pursue social and cultural strategies that contribute to happier and healthier workplaces.

5 The role of workers' organisations in preventing psychosocial risks

In a context of high unemployment and growing precariousness such as the one that currently characterizes Europe, it is more difficult for unions to give priority to the promotion of health and safety at work – as saving jobs and defending wage levels tend to take precedence. Yet, it is not acceptable that the most precious assets for workers as persons – their health and their life – should be reduced to an afterthought.

One of the working groups in the Hungarian seminar put forward the idea that union leaders ought to have specific advisors for health and safety, given the high complexity of these matters. Nevertheless, union leaders can and should make the promotion of safety and health at work a key dimension in union work.

The subject of prevention of occupational risks – namely stress, and moral and sexual harassment – is relatively new and sensitive. These are questions that were traditionally seen as personal matters that did not belong to the realm of collective action in which unions engaged. On the other hand, psychosocial risks call for new skills and specific training so that union strategies of prevention and intervention can be devised in conjunction with professionals and services of occupational safety and occupational medicine.

Starting from these premises, the seminars' participants debated the role of their organisations in preventing occupational risks. From these debates, the following conclusions/proposals emerged:

- To make the prevention of psychosocial risks part of union action integral to the efforts of promoting the safety, health and well-being of workers.
- To invest in the training of union leaders and workers' representatives on the subject of psychosocial risks – and in particular the problem of stress.

- To make use of collective bargaining and other instances of social dialogue for introducing the subjects of preventing stress and other risks.
- To promote awareness and participation among workers as well as the creation of instruments for detecting signs of psychosocial risks and ways for workers to speak openly about them, for victims and their families to be supported and for the actions of aggressors to be halted and prevented.

6 The European Parliament's resolution of November 2015

At the same time that the fourth and last seminar was taking place, the European Parliament was publishing an important resolution on the "European Union Strategic Framework on Safety and Health at Work".

In this document, the Members of the European Parliament made several remarks and recommendations to the European Commission and to member states in matters that are true challenges for the safety and health of workers.

Several of these challenges coincide with subjects of our project, namely the prevention of psychosocial risks and the importance of work stress; enforcing and improving legislation; participation of workers and workers' organisations in safety and health policies of their workplaces; the problem of gender, and the need to place the worker/person at the core of the production process.

7 Conclusion: continuing the debate

The EZA project “New Challenges for Safety and Health at Work” succeeded in bringing to the fore important questions relating to the health of European workers. Despite the differences in their respective social realities and labour market models, it was clear that the participating countries share a lot of problems and difficulties.

It is evident that psychosocial risks at work are on the rise and that they cause physical and psychological illnesses, absenteeism, discouragement and unhappiness. During the seminars, the causes, symptoms and consequences of these phenomena – for both persons and the economies as a whole – were carefully analysed. Fighting these risks requires the promotion – through instances of social dialogue – of concrete policies of prevention at both country and firm level.

Some important aspects received less attention in the discussions but are worthy of future debate. Among these, I would like to mention the relationship between modern work organisation – and particularly some forms of management – and the intensification of stress and bullying.

In this debate, co-operation with the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work – which was invited to and participated in three of the seminars – can be especially relevant. Recent surveys carried out in France have demonstrated that the organisational constraints posed by the current economic paradigm resulted in an intensification of the pace of work in the last 30 years. It is of paramount importance to delve into the consequences of this trend, which is also related with the development of information and communication technologies and their impact on the family and personal life of workers.

It was equally clear how important it was to introduce the questions of gender and equality in the process of health and safety at work. This is also a subject that requires further debate and exchange of information between workers’ organisations and within the EZA network, particularly regarding

actions to be carried out in co-operation with other institutions – such as the European Trade Union Institute, which has been doing commendable work in this regard.

Precariousness in labour relations is another growing trend in some European countries and it affects the health of workers. This question also received little attention in the seminars.

Another decisive debate is undoubtedly the role of our unions and EZA-affiliated training organisations in promoting the workers' health in the context of globalization and cutthroat competition between economic blocs, countries and companies. How can our organisations serve as effective instruments for the defence of workers, the promotion of decent work, and foster satisfaction and happiness at work in an economy where markets are at the core and people are seen as a mere resource?

It was bearing in mind the need to think of the future and further elaborate this set of conclusions and recommendations that we proposed to EZA a final meeting with all those who were responsible for the seminars. This meeting took place in Portugal in February 2016. In the meeting a working group was established that will follow up the subject within the EZA network.