

ETUC resolution on the EU Health and Safety Strategy 2013-2020

Adopted at the Executive Committee on 5-6 March 2013

In the current crisis, working conditions are tending to deteriorate and this trend is being exacerbated by the spread of various forms of inequality and increasing precariousness. The ETUC reiterates the resolution adopted by its Executive Committee in December 2011 which set out the priorities for a new Community strategy on health and safety at work for the period 2013-2020. The European Parliament also backed such a strategy in December 2011. A majority of EU Member States share this position. And in December 2012, the Advisory Committee on Health and Safety at Work unanimously adopted a tripartite declaration pressing the European Commission to act without delay.

The attitude taken by the European Commission is not up to the challenges being faced, for it has issued mixed and muddled messages about the adoption of this strategy and its contents. Indeed, so far no strategy has been adopted and no clear calendar announced for its adoption during 2013.

The absence of a Community strategy would send out a very negative message to the Member States, implying that in a time of crisis workers' health is a superfluous luxury. It would also hamper the development of ambitious, cohesive national strategies, foster a downward spiral of competition and compromise other policies that cannot be effectively implemented unless working conditions improve, like those on gender equality, active ageing, sustainable development, industry or public health.

The ETUC reiterates that the protection of health and safety at work is a fundamental workers' right, as recognised by the ILO and the EU Lisbon Treaty, which must not take second place to short-term economic considerations. On the contrary, numerous studies stress that the investments made in prevention make a positive contribution both to the social security system and to dynamic industrial policies.

The ETUC demands that the European Commission take its responsibilities pursuant to Article 153 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, which provides for harmonisation in the progress made with respect to working conditions. The ETUC also demands that the new strategy be adopted without delay.

The contents of this strategy must take account of previous experience, and aim primarily to improve structures geared towards prevention measures. Sufficient numbers of independent occupational physicians and preventive services as well as labour inspectors are needed as necessary building blocks in prevention. Also a closer attention must be paid to work-related health problems, in particular incidences of cancer, other medical conditions to do with exposure to chemicals, musculoskeletal disorders and problems associated with psychosocial factors, notably linked to poor working conditions and work organisation, and work intensification.

The crisis urgently demands a comprehensive preventative approach in the field of mental health. The spectre of unemployment, concern for the future and brutal restructuring are key factors increasing anxiety and stress at work. In this regard, the ETUC reiterates its demand for a European legal framework on the anticipation of change and restructuring as overwhelmingly called for by the European Parliament in January 2013

Furthermore, the ETUC calls on the Commission to respect the European Treaties by ensuring that framework agreements concluded in the social dialogue, notably on health and safety, are implemented by directive at the request of the relevant social partners.

Finally, the ETUC calls on the European Commission to present the proposal for a directive on musculoskeletal disorders, which have been blocked for years, and revise the existing directive on the protection of workers against carcinogens.