

To the President of the European Commission, J.M. Barosso

European Commission
Rue de la Loi 200
B-1049 Brussels
[Letter sent by e-mail]

Dear Mr. President Barosso,

Each year, around 160,000 people die in the European Union as a result of illness or accidents caused by poor working conditions. As the current EU occupational health and safety strategy ended in 2012, the Commission should have finalised its strategy on occupational health and safety for the period 2013-2020. However, so far the new strategy has been postponed and no clear commitment has been taken by the Commission about the timetable.

The trade unions are not the only ones deeply concerned that the new strategy has been postponed; in the Luxembourg Advisory Committee on Health and Safety, social partners and governments also shared this view and therefore, adopted an unanimous opinion in the plenary meeting of December 2012, asking the Commission to draw up the final text of a new strategy without delay. Earlier, in December 2011, the European Parliament also asked for a new European strategy, so all parties involved have spoken according to democratic procedures. An internet consultation concerning this subject therefore will probably not turn up information of any significance, and will only delay the action needed to be taken by the Commission.

Social partners, national authorities, experts and scientists know the major health and safety issues that have to be solved in order to protect the life of European workers and to meet the challenge of active ageing. The contents of a new strategy must take previous experience into account, and aim primarily to improve structures geared towards prevention measures. Sufficient numbers of independent occupational physicians and preventive services, as well as labour inspectors and workers' safety representatives, are needed as necessary building blocks for prevention. In addition, 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 present legal framework has had a very positive influence in the Member States and is based on sound principles. Nevertheless, most of the directives were adopted before 2000. Some fields have been neglected or need modernisation or adaptation. For instance, there is no specific provision dealing with emerging risks like nanomaterials or endocrine disruptors. The binding occupational limit values for carcinogens are available only for a few substances. Some of the major exposures are not adequately covered (crystalline, silica, diesel exhaust, formaldehyde, etc...) and contribute to a high number of work-related cancers. Closer attention also needs to be given to psychosocial risks.

For the ETUC and its affiliated trade union confederations and federations this new strategy on health and safety is of vital importance. Such a document is contributing to the definition of a national strategy in most of the Member States and its input will be important for the prevention of work-related diseases and accidents. 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 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.

From the words of Commissioner Andor, during an ETUI conference held in Brussels on 27 March, we understood that the former strategy had been evaluated as effective and that the importance of a new strategy is obvious for meeting the new challenges in this field.

Of course, we can understand the attention given by the Commission to the current economic crisis. However, from our point of view, this is an additional argument for adopting a new strategy without delay: around 160,000 people die every year in Europe due to poor working conditions. This in itself is an immense crisis and tragedy for those affected and is causing important economic losses for society. Figures, like this are normally only seen in wartime and thus need immediate attention.

With this letter we are asking the Commission to produce the final text of the strategy document.

With kind regards,



Bernadette Ségol
General Secretary, ETUC



Wim van Veelen
Spokesperson, Workers Group
Advisory Committee, Health & Safety
Luxembourg

cc: Mr L Andor, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion