

QUO VADIS: HEALTH AND SAFETY AT WORK?

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EU pressed pause button on 'quality' jobs

Brussels has postponed the adoption of the European health and safety strategy which since 2002 has allowed member states to move on an equal footing to protect workers. Putting the strategy on the backburner will undermine the sound functioning of the labour market, experts told EurActiv.

The new European strategy was supposed to be adopted last year for the new period 2013-2020. But so far much of the work in the policy area has been progressing in slow motion.

“The Commission seems to believe that the [Occupational Safety and health] strategy is a luxury in time of economic crisis. What counts for them is [jobs] quantity and not quality and they say that companies cannot be burdened or bothered with it,” said Laurent Vogel, senior researcher at the working conditions unit of the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI).

Earlier this year, in March, the Commission published an evaluation of the European strategy 2007-2012 it had commissioned from the Danish consulting group COWI.

The evaluation is unequivocal in



recommending a new strategy for the forthcoming period to ‘further exploit the potential for creating European added value’.

“There is evidence to support the argument that occupational health and safety at work can create benefits which will exceed costs,” reads the paper, which gives a number of recommendations including the need for a new strategy.

A Commission spokesperson stressed that the EU executive has postponed action to undertake an in-depth analysis in order to decide on the next steps and is currently assessing the submissions to the consultation launched over the summer and to which it received over 500 responses.

Evaluation of both previous strategies clearly shows the positive effects both on Occupational Health and Safety systems (OSH) and policies, as well as decrease of work-place accidents, the spokesperson explained. The spokesperson did not say when the next strategy, if any materialises, will be pushed through but “it could be in the Spring of 2014”, he added.

Strategy or policy framework

Sources say the paper will not be a strategy, but a policy framework. The Commission’s spokesperson argued that

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it was too early to say. "In any case the content is more important than the title," he added.

"What is clear is the message: It [health and safety in the workplace] is obviously not considered as a priority," Vogel snapped.

It is estimated that every year more than 160,000 workers die because of accidents related to work or an occupational disease.

According to Eurofound, the European Foundation for the improvement of living and working conditions, 20% of jobs in the EU present high risks to the health of job holders.

"Job quality is key to support the sound functioning of labour markets," say experts at Eurofound, who argue that the strategy contributes to maintain workers' capacity to remain fully engaged and prevent a premature exclusion from the labour market.

"For companies they prevent costs related to absenteeism," reads the submission to the consultation of Eurofound, which underscores that the cost of work-related stress alone (source INRS) is estimated between 0.1% and 2.6% of GDP.

There is evidence that MSDs (musculoskeletal disease) may be increasing and this raises concerns, continues the Dublin-based agency, adding that the same trend could be seen for psycho-social risks, including stress-related diseases.

"A healthy workforce is a more productive workforce," insists Eurofound. In its latest report, Eurofound states that in the EU28, 20% of workers (18% of men and 22% of women) score high on 'mental health risk' which highlights a growing need for attention to be paid to mental well-being in the workplace.

REFIT in the way?

Experts point the finger at the REFIT smart regulation paper, which the European Commission President, José Manuel Barroso, presented last October, as a way to cut red tape and administrative burdens so that companies can invest and

create jobs, and growth.

"Can you imagine a government which announces that it is going to block all the new rules on health and safety at work, saying that there are too many rules, that all these safety rules designed to protect workers are damaging the employers [...]. We have never heard such nonsense," said Herman Fonck, from the Belgian Christian Trade Union CSC-ACV.

Fonck is referring to the fact that two major legislative initiatives in the policy of health and safety at work - Musculoskeletal Disorders and work-related cancers - have been dropped from the Commission's work plan and will not be tabled in the current mandate.

"The whole machinery of Europe has ground to a standstill in matters of occupational safety," added Fonck.

Slippery slope towards renationalisation

Unions fear that this will be a slippery slope towards renationalisation of health and safety policy and legislation.

"If we go towards a renationalisation there will be huge gaps between countries," said Vogel.

Even if there is no EU strategy, some countries will maintain a high-level of protection in their national policies. That would be the case for Belgium, the Netherlands, France and Denmark, added Vogel. But for others it is clear that the EU strategy was the driver for national strategies, he continued.

In its submission to the consultation the Dutch ministry of employment and social affairs stressed that although the European labour legislation is well developed, new risks such as nanotechnology need further regulation.

"There is a risk that if the European Commission is no longer progressing according to the state of technology and science, the member states will be obliged to take action (again) at the national level. That would run counter to the desired level playing fields," reads the Dutch contribution.

Unions: Men and women more equal, but not on workplace health, safety

Even though politicians and trade unions have tried for many years to tackle gender inequality in the EU labour market, gaps persist. But they have become smaller during the financial crisis, experts say.

The EU has put gender equality at the heart of its policies over the past 30 years, but men and women continue to have different occupations, take on jobs in opposing work places and sectors and continue to be employed on diverging contracts and receive different rewards for the work they do, even after adjustments for skills and education are made.

Speaking at the conference 'Jobs take their toll: The impact of ageing, gender and occupational hazards on workers' in Brussels on Tuesday (10 December), Agnieszka Piasna of the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) pushed for the closing of some gender gaps in key labour market indicators, like pay levels and employment rates.

However, such a development is not solely positive, and it comes with a downside, Piasna stressed.

"This closing of gaps between genders actually drives from the worsening of working conditions for men in the current crisis and not at all from improvement of the situation for women," she said.

Occupational diseases

Elke Schneider of the Prevention and

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Research unit at the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) emphasised that the awareness of gender issues is still low at both the policy level and at the level of labour expectations.

For example, the research on occupational diseases is still focused on male-dominated sectors, but it should also explore industries where diseases strike female workers.

Emblematic is the case of health and safety for hairdressers, who are in constant contact with all sorts of soaps, shampoos and dyes, and who also suffer from back injuries and muscular problems.

“Risk assessment on exposure to dangerous substances needs to be targeting women. There are work places where women are highly exposed with a combined exposure,” Schneider said.

“The measurements are still much focused on male work places. So if you don’t look for the right thing, you won’t have the information and then you’ll make the

assumption or conclusion that women are not exposed to dangerous substances,” she continued.

Schneider added that as women move more into male-dominated jobs, new policies would have to ensure that the personal equipment are also designed for women.

Unhappiness and solutions

G rard Valenduc, associate professor at the universities Louvain-la-Neuve and Namur, said that women tended to be more unhappy than men with a lack of autonomy at work, something which affects a growing number of female workers as they age.

Many women feel that they lack career prospects. Especially around the ages 30-39, women in all occupations say that they have fewer opportunities to evolve in their careers, except for those in the education sector.

Piasna added that the way to bridge the gender gaps will be to continue monitoring



the labour market conditions with the focus on gender and the gender segregation in the different sectors.

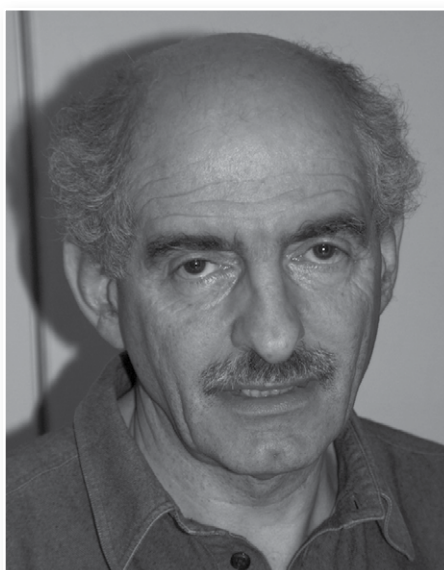
“There are positive job quality and well-being effects expected from limiting gender segregation, so jobs should be open for men in female-dominated occupations and for women in male-dominated occupations. There should also be supervisory positions for women who are very beneficial in terms of ensuring job quality for both men and women, especially for men,” she said.

Labour market expert: We need active EU policies on health at work

With changing demographics putting pressure on the European labour markets, EU countries need to put in place healthy and sustainable work systems, argues Serge Volkoff.

Serge Volkoff is a statistician, author, expert on the labour market and research director at the Centre for Employment Studies

(CEE) in France. He spoke to EurActiv’s Henriette Jacobsen.



I would like to start by asking you a question on the retirement age. In Sweden, their prime minister, Fredrik Reinfeldt, has said that he wants the retirement age in Sweden to be 75, which he thinks is a reasonable age as we’re all becoming

older and the children who are born today may live to 100 years. If you work until you are 75, you’ll still have around 25 years of retirement. Maybe this is true for the future labour markets, but how does it sound to your ears to have a retirement age at 75 now?

The first element, I would like to bring forward is that retirement age is not a very accurate way of talking about this. This means that from a country to another, the meaning of a retirement age is not the same. For example, in France we have a rather low retirement age which is moving forward to 62 by now, but at the same time we have a work-life duration condition. This means that one has to have worked around 41 years. So you’ll have many people that when they reach 61.5 years which must be the legal retirement age, you have an important proportion of employees who will not have had their 41

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years of work-life duration. Therefore, they must wait a little bit. So with this work-life duration condition, it makes it difficult to say that the retirement age will be at 62.

Another aspect is that while the legal retirement age in some countries is at 65, if you leave at 64 or 63, you lose a little bit of the amount of your pension, but not too much. So this is quite different from a situation where it's 65 and if you leave at 64, you lose quite a lot. This is very different. Therefore, you see that even now, you compare European countries which is easy to do with the OECD statistics, you can see that the differences on retirement age are much bigger than the actual average age of the end of a professional life. Maybe you have sometimes seven years of differences on retirement ages, and you have only 2.5 years maximum of differences of effective actual retirement age.

So it's important to know when the Swedish prime minister says 75 years, does this include that when you are 74, you lose 10% and at 72, you lose 30% and so on and so forth? Or does this only diminish your pension a little bit if you leave sooner? This has to be clear.

So if the question is, are we able to work until 75, which is another question, then some people do and some people don't. In some job situations it's possible. Some people do that. You already have people who do work until they are 75, for example some managers, politicians, artists, scientists work even after their retirement age. They keep on working because they like their job. So of course it is possible to do so, but it depends completely on the person and the job. You can't set that as a general measure. Then you are right that it can't be the same for every generation. There will definitely be a difference from now and 40 years from now.

The last thing I would like to say is that the link between the length of life as a whole and the length of working life is not necessarily determined in such a narrow way. For a very long time, the age of retirement has remained steady or even, depending on the country, diminishing a little but,

although at the same time, life expectancy would grow. In a historical perspective, what the Swedish prime minister said is not true. The real evolution at a historical scale has been more the contrary. We have retired sooner and sooner although we would live longer and longer. This is what has happened for the last two centuries. So you may say that it will be normal and necessary to raise the retirement age little by little, but it can't be done so automatically and it's not only because we are going to live longer. One hundred years as average life expectancy... I think nobody foresees that. That is too many years. In industrial countries now, life expectancy grows at a rhythm of about 2-3 months per year. This means that the life expectancy in our countries now is around 79. If you want to reach 100, this means 21 more years at the present rhythm of growth, so it will take around a century. Many things might have changed in the meantime.



Another thing which the Swedish prime minister emphasised is that those who have tough physical jobs, how would they be able to work for that many years. He proposed that they, when they turn 50, should get a new education so that during

their last years as part of the workforce they wouldn't have a tough physical job. I have spoken to another expert who said this could not work as those with tough physical jobs usually don't have an education in the first place so it would be difficult to make them get one later on. Do you agree on this?

I would be more moderate, especially talking about Sweden which sort of stands out as an example for life-long learning. It's probably one of the most if not the most developed countries. There's a real practice and a real knowledge on life-long learning in Sweden. At least that's what we think in France, which is the last one in the class. We are not good at all at that. I would say that the Swedish prime minister is partly right. I wouldn't say that suddenly at 50, having a big an long period of training which would allow you to completely change your job is necessary. I would rather praise a life-long learning from the very beginning when you start in one job which a tough physical job and everyone is aware that there is a risk that it won't last, then you start thinking about what is going to happen afterwards.

The good example is the elite athletes. When things are well-organised, these people have next to practicing their sport prepared what will follow. This model could be considered for all kinds of physical and painful jobs. In France in the present reform of the retirement system, where there is a law now being discussed in the French parliament, was is going to be called a 'painfulness account' which means that when a person has a job with physical constrains, or has night work or deals with hazards such as noise or various toxic products as part of the work environment, they will add points to their account. These points will allow them first of all to have a training period after a certain number of years that might help them being able to change job eventually and give them the possibility to change their career. The same account with points will allow them to have periods of part-time and also in the

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end to have opportunities to leave jobs to retire sooner than others. This is an actual measure which is present in the reform of the retirement system in France which is now being discussed by our deputies.

I think it is necessary anyhow... even if we don't change the retirement age, the idea of opening possibilities of changing jobs among those who have tough physical jobs after 10 or 20 years is not a bad idea. It already more or less exists in several big industrial companies. They try to build opportunities for re-allocation.

Something I came across when I looked at statistics in different EU countries regarding their retirement ages is that women can sometimes retire earlier than men. What do you think of this?

I know that these differences exist. In France it doesn't. I suppose it has something to do with family laws. This could be in countries where the rate of employment among women is rather lower than in other EU countries. This means that it keeps on being considered that women are well at their place when they are at home, partly.

You could also put it the other way around and say that women live longer so they should also be part of the labour force for a longer time?

I wouldn't recommend such a solution either because the reason for having a shorter life expectancy shouldn't have a shorter professional life as a consequence. In my view this should only be when work by itself shortens life expectancy. For example, if you work at night, it has been proved that this shortens life expectancy. Therefore, this can be a good justification for retiring sooner, but the other characteristics of life expectancy shouldn't play a part.

I can give you another example: We see in France a slightly longer life on average in the southern part of the country compared to the northern part. We don't quite know why. Maybe it has something to do with the food or the weather. Nevertheless, nobody

should pay for having later retirement in the south of France than in the north.

In the face of an ageing population, what work environment needs to be created to help workers retain their physical and mental health, their motivation and productivity throughout an extended working life?

First of all, we must not forget that there is a birth rate issue. This means that from a country to another... for example, France is not too bad there. We have of course had a drop in the birth rates most visible in the 1970s, but not a drop that was too strong. This is very different for Germany, Italy and Spain where the birth rate has fallen dramatically. I know that this is not the question you asked me, but I think we need to keep this in mind. In a country where you still have many young people, it's not the same as in countries where you'll have only few of them. This depends very much on the birth rate from a country to another.

Now to go back to your question, we need anyhow to have policies for what for example some Swedish researchers call 'sustainable work systems'. It means that health and skill competences are not consumed, but on the contrary have the opportunity to be developed. Sweden is not a too bad country for that if we look through various indicators.

It's true that we have to have policies that prevent as much as possible health declining and competences becoming obsolete. The development of our countries should go hand in hand with improvements concerning working conditions and life-long learning.

It is true that in countries where the birth rate is low as I mentioned in German, Italy and Spain, it's an emergency issue because if we want to avoid either many people over 60 in work situations they don't want to be in or having a terrible concentration of difficulties for young people, you need to have a very active policy on the improvement of working conditions.

Who will influence those policies from a worker's perspective – would it be the trade union or the individual worker?

Well, I don't know as a matter of fact. Anyway, I should say that the role of trade unions is ought to be very precious. It could be at the level of the sector, the company or at national level. I should say even at a European level. Why? Because trade unions are supposed to have an ability and capacity to build links between individual situations. This ageing issue is being felt by people on a personal level. It's very important that negotiations have the capacity to give a general, collective framework to that, keeping in mind the historical evolution, sectors, productivity, issues surrounding wages and the working time. It seems to me that it ought to be a very important field for trade union activity.

For 10 years now, the European Commission has put in place a strategy for health and safety on working conditions. For the first time they have decided not to have an EU strategy anymore. Do you think that is a smart move and would you say those strategies have had an impact so far?

I can only answer this question through our practice and what we see in our country. I haven't at all studied this at a European level. I can only say that this European strategy has had in a country like ours, France, a very positive impact on the various decisions regarding the laws and the various incentives decided by our governments of various political convictions. Therefore, I should hope, that with the will of the Commission, that work conditions could keep improving. Improvement of work conditions should be pushed forward through activities by the Commission. It's very useful to have this message because after that, among social partners and the national administrations, you can use these European indicators, initiatives and directives to push forward several projects, systems and policies. It would be useful for sure.

Japanese-style productivity has side effects for EU automotive workers

Ever since European car manufacturers tried to match Japanese-style productivity, the health and safety of the EU automotive sector has declined, say researchers.

Faced with global competition years ago, European manufacturers have decided to adopt the Japanese lean production model, which is used by Toyota, for example. But the results show that one size does not fit all.

According to American researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Japanese automotive workers were more productive than their international counterparts due to the way they were structuring group work in factories.

However, researchers say that while it may have been possible to compare the productivity of workers in Japan and the United States, in many ways these comparisons between Japan and Europe do not make much sense.

Speaking at the conference 'Jobs take their toll: The impact of ageing, gender and occupational hazards on workers', organised by the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), Stephen Bouquin, of the French Université d'Évry Val-d'Essonne, said that it was now possible to criticise the Japanese model from a scientific point of view.

Today, there are still 10-12 global companies in the automotive industry and competition is like a "war", Bouquin says,



adding that this has had a huge impact on the organisation of work.

Increased productivity?

While the Japanese model has increased productivity among workers, it has also accelerated health problems.

"The work conditions are extreme," Bouquin continued. "We still see people who have a heart attack while they are busy working at the factory and fall dead in both Japan and in Europe."

The researcher added that most workers at the factories, usually men, report having backaches, headaches and problems with stiffness in their arms and feeling that the power in their hands is disappearing. Even among the youngest workers, there are regular complaints.

Francesco Tuccino of the Institute for Economic and Social Research in Rome said that the Japanese model could have a mental impact that put workers at risk.

"In the past workers were given time to think about things. Now that's no longer the case. There are more tasks. The mental burden is much heavier. They will

be given a series of actions where they have to perform and even if their tasks are becoming simpler, they really need to make an effort, trying to remember them," Tuccino explained.

Labour unions' job

Wolf Jäcklein, policy advisor at industriALL, a global union federation, said that risking workers' quality of life is the consequence of the optimisation processes of car manufactories, which include getting rid of sections with no added value, work at a high rhythm and pace and staff reductions.

Jäcklein said labour unions needed to analyse how the companies were being structured so as to offer them a different production model which goes beyond increased productivity level for the benefit of the workers.

Bouquin added that labour unions should work on sustainable work indicators.

"We have and know everything to make objective conclusions to improve the situation together with specialists," he said.

Life-long learning can transform EU labour markets, experts say

With increased life expectancies and an ageing workforce, politicians and employers alike must invest in life-long learning programmes so that workers fully adapt to new working conditions and are able to seize new opportunities, experts say.

In the face of skewed demographics, with a shrinking workforce and a major part of the population retiring, many EU governments have recently raised the legal retirement age, which currently stretches from 59 years for women in Romania and the Czech Republic to 67-68 in Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, Greece and Denmark.

Earlier this year, Swedish Prime Minister, Fredrik Reinfeldt, said that his country must consider raising the legal retirement age to 75, in order to finance the Swedish welfare state in a global world economy.

Reinfeldt argued that when half of today's children in Sweden can expect to become 100 years old, Swedes will have to change the way they view their work-life balance.

To be able to work until the age of 75, the Swedish prime minister said he envisioned at least one career change during a person's working life, as the job one may have as a young person could become too tough or stressful at a later age.

Reinfeldt has also proposed that Swedish workers with tough physical jobs be re-educated when they are around 50



Photo: Marcin Balcerzak/Shutterstock

years old in order to change career to enable them to work until 75.

Life-long learning

Marianne Levinsen, chief scientist at Fremforsk, the Centre for Future Studies in Denmark, told EurActiv that

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Reinfeldt's proposal "makes sense", but the retirement age is still a politically very sensitive issue in the EU depending on nationality and would be difficult to get through in a country such as France.

While raising the retirement age in many EU member states would be a responsible way to change policies, this might be a difficult measure to get through, Levinsen said, as the majority of voters will also be older and unlikely to back fewer rights.

However, the scientist called Reinfeldt's idea of giving workers with strenuous jobs a new education "unrealistic".

"There is a reason why these people didn't get a good education in the first place and had to take on these kinds of jobs. What is much more important is to keep lifting the level of skills of the people you have hired or those who are unemployed, so that they continue to get better. Then they will be capable of taking on other jobs eventually," Levinsen said.

Serge Volkoff, a statistician and director of research at the Centre for Employment Studies (CEE), also stressed the importance of life-long learning for workers.

"I would say that the Swedish prime minister is partly right. I wouldn't say that suddenly at 50, having a big and long period of training would allow you to completely change your job," said Volkoff.

"I would rather praise a life-long learning from the very beginning when you start a tough physical job and everyone is aware of the risks, then you start thinking about what is going to happen afterwards," the research director said.

Healthy environments

In addition to upgrading skills for workers, politicians and employers must create "sustainable work systems", Volkoff stated, meaning that health and skills competences can continue being

developed.

"It's true that we have to have policies that prevent as much as possible health declining and competences becoming obsolete. The development of our countries should go hand in hand with improvements concerning working conditions and life-long learning," the French expert said, adding that in those EU countries with unfortunate demographics, active policies to improve work conditions are crucial.

Levinsen highlighted that "good bosses" are also a necessity.

"Research shows that what will lift our productivity and efficiency is new digital systems and technologies, but the people who need to make sure that we get these technologies are in the management," she said.

Not the new America

Despite the crisis-led pressure and stress, Europe is not becoming the US, but will keep its social model, experts agreed.

"The difference is that we have decided that we want welfare states with social security nets and access to universal healthcare. This is something we expect of our politicians and state whereas in the US, there has always been a great resistance to the state interfering with anything," the scientist said, adding that some rights will disappear as they are from a different time.

"We will have to look at our social systems, but we will still keep them because this is an ideological difference. We believe that it's good to have these social systems in Europe. We like that the state makes sure that there is a minimum standard of services," Levinsen stated.

Volkoff added that the role of trade unions ought to remain "very precious" in the future as trade unions have an ability and capacity to build links between individual situations and that the ageing issue is being felt by people at a personal level.

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