

New OSH strategy should aim to mainstream OSH, be less gender blind and be based on lessons learnt from the pandemic



(26 April 2021) On the 21 April 2021, EPSU representative Adam Rogalewski participated in a dedicated hearing organised by the European Commission with the social partners on the New Occupational Safety and Health Strategic Framework 2021-2027. EPSU was a part of the trade union delegation coordinated by the ETUC.

ETUC stressed that the strategy should not be just another policy document in the form of a framework. It must be a binding strategy that will be implemented by Member States and, more importantly, by employers. OSH needs to be mainstreamed and interconnected with the quality of working conditions. Particular attention should be given to making OSH less gender blind, and also tailoring protection and prevention based on other characteristics, for example for older and younger workers or migrant workers.

Complementing the presentation of the ETUC, Adam Rogalewski, who was previously a rapporteur of the European Economic and Social Committee's opinion the topic of OSH[\[1\]](#), focused on the following points:

Since cancer is one of the leading causes of death in the world (120 000 deaths a year in the EU due to work related cancer), the EU needs increase their efforts to protect workers from cancer. The EU Beats Cancer Plan is a step in the right direction, but more attention should be given to work related cancer. We need to eliminate asbestos and protect workers who are exposed to it, such as firefighters.

We also need to protect the 12.7 million healthcare workers in Europe, who are exposed to carcinogenic, mutagenic and reprotoxic hazardous drugs. Therefore EPSU, as a leading organisation in the Stop Cancer at Work campaign[\[2\]](#), is calling for the introduction of Hazardous Medicinal Products (HMPs) in the current revision of the Carcinogens and Mutagens Directive. HMPs are not only carcinogens but also reprotoxic substances.

Furthermore, the EU needs to address the Psycho-Social Risks and Stress (PSRS) at work, particularly prevalent in the healthcare sector which is under a lot of pressure due to the pandemic. There is a need to have a dedicated directive on PSRS, which will provide better protection by including, among other things, a definition of burnout. It is also necessary to improve the regulations regarding Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs). The risks of PSRS and MSDs are also increasing in the teleworking environment. One of the ways to reduce the PSRS risk will be legislation on the right to disconnect.

More than ever, the pandemic has demonstrated that there is a higher risk for PSRS and MSDs due to workforce shortages in the hospital sector. Therefore, one of the demands of EPSU is to ensure adequate staffing levels also as a means of better OSH prevention. Certainly, adequate staffing levels are equally crucial for public service workplaces and this shows again the importance of linking OSH regulations with general working conditions, including better work organisation, access to resources, training and access to trade unions including health and safety representatives.

The pandemic also demonstrated the urgent need to improve working conditions in the care sector (social services). Precarious working conditions, agency employment and lack of access to training and personal protective equipment was undoubtedly one of the main reasons for the appalling death rates among care recipients. Another lesson learnt from the pandemic was the importance of providing access to quality personal protective equipment. COVID-19 needs to be recognised as an occupational disease, with the burden of evidence shifted from the workers to employers, along with entitlement to full paid sick leave from the first day.

It is also important that the Commission evaluates the implementation of OSH Directives, including the Directive 2010/32/EU on prevention from sharp injuries in the hospital and healthcare sector^[3]. This directive was implemented as part of the EPSU and HOSPEEM framework agreement from 2009 on the protection of workers from sharp injuries in the hospital and healthcare sector.

Finally, when it comes to better enforcement, Adam Rogalewski underlined the importance of investment in public services, one of them being labour inspectorates. Without adequate staffing in labour inspectorates or other relevant OSH enforcement and prevention authorities, it is not possible to properly implement the new strategic framework nor address the OSH risks.

The Commission has identified the following six potential building blocks for the new OSH Strategic Framework 2021-2027:

1. Anticipating and managing change in the context of the green and digital transitions
2. Preventing work-related diseases and accidents
3. Increasing preparedness

4. Improving application and enforcement
5. Ensuring evidence based policy
6. Promoting higher OSH standards in the world

The Commission argues that *development of a new EU OSH Strategic Framework for the period 2021-2027 is particularly relevant in the context of the green and digital transitions, prompted by the European Green Deal⁴ and the EU digital strategy as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan recalled the need for an updated strategic framework due to rapid technological and societal changes.*

[1] <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/summary-costs-and-benefits-investments-occupational-safety-and-health-osh/opinions>

[2] <https://www.stopcanceratwork.eu>

[3] <https://osha.europa.eu/nl/legislation/directives/council-directive-2010-32-eu-prevention-from-sharp-injuries-in-the-hospital-and-healthcare-sector>

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