

Brief report of the EPSU/ETUI workshop on “Working conditions and Health and Safety issues for firefighters” 10-12 June 2010, Vienna

1) Introduction

This report gives the main elements of the discussions during the workshop organised by the Education Department of the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) and the EPSU firefighters network which took place from 10-12 June 2010 in Vienna, Austria.

At the last EPSU firefighters meeting in September 2009 (see report <http://www.epsu.org/a/5917>) we agreed to focus the next activities of the network on health and safety issues. One of the activities includes the preparation with the ETUI's health and safety experts of a brochure entitled “**health and safety in the firefighting sector.**” The brochure will be around 50 pages, addressed to members but also of interest to a wider public. It will outline the problems and give recommendations, drawing heavily on national examples.

The EPSU/ETUI workshop in Vienna provided an opportunity to develop the content of the brochure with Fabienne Scandella, the ETUI researcher who has the main responsibility for drafting the brochure. The workshop also provided an opportunity to discuss in depth developments regarding the **Working Time Directive** (see EPSU position on <http://www.epsu.org/a/6584>) and general EPSU priorities (see presentation).

28 participants took part in the workshop from 18 countries (see list), together with staff from the ETUI (Fabienne Scandella, Viktor Kempa, Jean Claude le Douaron) and from EPSU (Richard Pond and Penny Clarke).

Members who have not yet answered the questionnaire on information on the structure of the fire service and working conditions in the different countries are invited to do so.

The report of the workshop, the presentations and other materials will be on the firefighters' section of the EPSU website <http://www.epsu.org/r/315>

2) The context

In all countries in Europe prevention is becoming the priority for the fire service. In many instances the number of fires is falling. This means, however, that tackling fires can become more dangerous as firefighters may have less experience/training. Firefighters' jobs are becoming more varied and complex as new emergency services are developed. In many countries for example firefighters also provide ambulance services (but not necessarily medical intervention).

Firefighters are exposed to an increasing range of dangerous substances, for example fire resistant materials. There are also new problems (e.g., third-party violence). In a few countries there are a number of women firefighters, but numbers are low (less than 3%). Firefighters are increasingly carrying out educational and administrative tasks but these are often perceived (and valued) as being less important. In many countries the age profile of firefighters is shifting upwards. In some countries there is an over-reliance on 'voluntary' firefighters.

Firefighters' unions have high density rates in all countries, and levels range from 40% to 95%, underlying the potential to respond positively to the challenges. The EPSU firefighters' network is a key instrument to bring together trade union experiences strategies and to

develop a common European approach to improving employment conditions of firefighters and the quality of the fire service.

3) The EU regulatory framework on health and safety

Viktor Kempa, ETUI, explained how ETUI's health and safety department (HESA)¹ supports trade union strategies to improve workers' health and safety and well-being. Many groups of workers have difficult working conditions and/or are exposed to particular risks (see also data from Eurofound's surveys - see <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ewco/surveys/index.htm>).

Growing work intensity together with longer working lives makes it even more important to promote a healthy working environment. There are growing respiratory and other problems caused by chemical working substances. The EU has developed a substantial 'acquis' in health and safety regulations (see the ETUI's "***Finding your way round the EU health and Safety Legislation***" (see <http://hesa.etui-rehs.org/uk/publications/pub36.htm>) but the rules are sometimes poorly known and/or implemented. The EU 'acquis' on health and safety aims to manage systematically the all kinds of workplaces hazards by elimination, substitution or reduction of the risks. A responsibility for the management of health and safety and the contextual procedures lies fully on the employer. On the other hand the European legislation considers the involvement of workers in health and safety issues especially through information, consultation and participation as an essential imperative. The European Union has its own strategic plan for a five years period. The strategy for 2007-2012 aims to reduce both work-related accidents and occupational diseases by 25%. The overwhelming majority of work related illnesses and deaths in the EU are caused by occupational diseases. The EU acquis stresses a preventive approach based on a hierarchy of prevention measures. One essential rule says that work has to be adapted to the person, not the other way round. The discussion with Viktor emphasised that:

- Strategies are needed to both to assess the impact of health risks on firefighters and to improve the quality of work
- It is important to identify and monitor the main health risks faced by firefighters
- Data is lacking, not least because there is no standard approach to collecting information
- In some countries (e.g., Spain) firefighters are not covered by health and safety protections that apply to other workers

Dag Skaseth, Fagforbundet Norway, gave a case study of how national trade unions can be involved in one area of EU policy that impacts directly on firefighters, namely the **standardisation** of personal protective equipment (ppe)². Dag gave the example of work done to improve the standards developed for firefighters' helmets (see presentation). Being involved in standardisation can be time-consuming and difficult - not least because economic interests dominate – but it is important and can bring tangible results. Discussion with Dag stressed that:

- Standards for ppe should be the highest that is necessary for protection, which means good risk assessment is needed. Too high standards can also be a problem (example of US firefighters who suffered heat stroke)
- Standardisation has drawbacks as well as advantages (e.g., can be an obstacle to the introduction of new and better materials)
- Standards have to be seen in context of the tasks that are to be performed. The best standards won't always be enough (which means it is important to assess tasks)
- The care and maintenance of equipment is also important

¹ See also <http://www.etui.org/en/About-ETUI/Departments/Health-and-Safety>

² The ETUI website sets out in detail how standards are drawn up, using the example of the machinery Directive see http://hesa.etui-rehs.org/uk/dossiers/dossier.asp?dos_pk=19

- EU law says that governments should help social partners to influence preparation and monitoring of standards, and some do (e.g. Denmark and Sweden). Unions should make the most of this.

4) Outline of the ETUI brochure on “health and safety in the firefighting sector”

Fabienne Scandella outlined the structure of the planned brochure. The brochure will be around 50 pages, addressed to members but also of interest to a wider public. It will outline the problems and give recommendations, drawing heavily on experience of EPSU members. It will contain four sections:

- Presentation of the firefighting sector
- Characteristics of working and employment conditions
- Impact on health and safety
- Trade union strategies

The experience of each union/country should be reflected in the brochure.

Union “achievements” should also be highlighted. In the workshop we heard about many, for example:

- In Sweden there is a social partner project regarding the care and cleaning of ppe. Many chemicals are absorbed through the skin so washing is very important. We heard that firefighters can be well trained and equipped but not do this properly. The project involves the development of standard procedures and routines for washing equipment after incidents (see presentation....)
- In Finland the unions have been involved in a multi-disciplinary project to improve the ‘operational capacity’ of firefighters. The project covers many different elements, including risk assessment (see presentation)
- In Estonia the union was successful in achieving 24 hour shift system for firefighters, even though this has to be renegotiated each year
- Italian unions successfully campaigned for special glasses for firefighters with poor eyesight

Given that all participants stressed the importance of risk assessment and prevention, it would be useful to have more examples in this area.

The brochure will be drafted following the workshop and it will draw heavily of the discussion and examples provided by EPSU members. There will be a possibility to give further input before the brochure is finalised. When we have the brochure we can look for opportunities to disseminate and use it to improve health and safety conditions and national level.³

The ETUI is drafting a number of health and safety brochures that are aimed at specific sectors/groups of workers.

5) State of play on the EU working time Directive

Richard Pond outlined the issues raised by the EC consultation on the Directive that is taking place (see presentation). EPSU stresses that EU law must protect workers (and the public) from the health and safety affects of long working hours and poor working organisation. The network working time survey in 2006 <http://www.epsu.org/a/2633> also addressed these issues. Discussion with Richard stressed that

- In some countries ‘volunteer’ firefighters are working far too many hours

³ For example in cooperation with the European Agency for Health and Safety (OSHA), based in Balboa. The agency has Focal Points in each EU, EFTA and candidate country http://osha.europa.eu/en/about/organisation/focal_points.

- When annual working hours are counted firefighters in most countries respect the average of 48 hour per week
- In some countries 'on-call' work however in the fire station is not being counted as working time (contrary to the ECJ rulings)
- There are difficulties in taking necessary rest periods, due to the shift system and/or lack of staff
- Some fire services had to use derogations from the Working Time Directive in terms of rest periods and night work. However, some had also resorted to using the individual opt-out from the 48-hour week because they had not yet been able to reorganize working time to keep within the 48-hour average
- Further exchange is needed on the short and long-term effects on health of different shift systems. The way the shifts systems are organised also affects the life-styles of firefighters.
- Double work appears to be a problem in some countries. (To note, working time regulations cover the individual worker, not the employment contract.)
- Not all working time is paid (but the EU Directive does not deal with the question of pay).

The discussion with Richard and in the working groups sessions clarified that the health and safety aspect of working time are a key concern for the network and that EU standards in this areas are a cornerstone of 'social Europe'.

6) Other issues discussed

A number of other issues were raised during the workshop, which we can return to in future. These included:

- The overdependence on volunteer firefighters in some countries. The EPSU firefighters Charter clearly states that volunteer firefighters should complement, not replace, professional firefighters. It would be useful to learn about union strategies here. The current and upcoming cuts in public spending may increase the pressure on fire services.
- The way collective bargaining systems are constructed impacts on the organisation of the fire service and the task carried out (as well as on health and safety). The 'weight' given to premiums for shift work or night work can for example affect the way life-time earnings are spread and how different tasks are valued. Again, exchange on wage determination would be useful
- Initiatives are taking place in some countries to support women's entry into the fire service. These should be supported.
- There is a need for training and life long learning strategies to address not only the tasks firefighters carry out today but also prepare firefighters for new tasks in the future, both within and outside the fire service. More discussion on this would be useful.

7) Conclusions and follow-up

The workshop discussion will feed into the health and safety brochure and it is hoped that this will prove a practical tool to support trade union strategies regarding health and safety.

The discussion in working time will also feed into EPSU policy.

As mentioned, workshop participants are asked to verify and complete the annex to this note on national information. Members who were not able to take part in the workshop can also send in information.