

# Stress prevention in Europe : review of trade union activities - Obstacles and future strategies

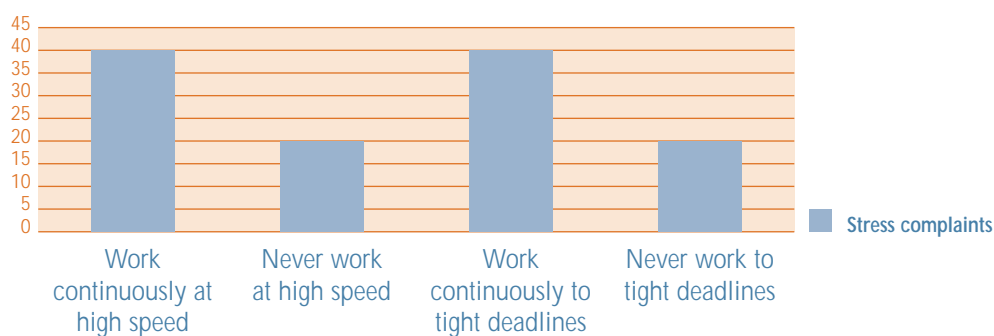
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## Background

Stress is the second most common health symptom reported by European workers (3<sup>rd</sup> European survey, Dublin Foundation)<sup>1</sup>. Stress and features of work

organization like pace of work, time pressure and repetitive work were found to be highly correlated. For example, where conditions like working at high speed and to tight deadlines were present, the number of people reporting stress doubled (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
Percentage of reported stress complaints



National surveys carried out by local authorities, research institutes and trade unions underline the close links between stress and work organisation.

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<sup>1</sup> Pascal Paoli, Damien Merllié, *3rd European survey of working conditions*, Dublin, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Data based on occupational health service reports in 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Stichting van de Arbeid, Nota: *Beperking ziekteverzuim en instroom in de WAO* (Report: Reduction of absenteeism and work incapacitation risk), Den Haag, Stichting van de Arbeid, Publicatienummer (5/99), 1999.

<sup>4</sup> *Covenants on health and safety at work for improved conditions in the Netherlands*, Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, Information, Library and Documentation Directorate, The Hague, 2000.

## Social and economic impact of stress in Member States

- In **Austria** 13.9% of men and 22.6% of women took invalidity retirement due to psychiatric and neurological illnesses (Federal Ministry of Labour, Health & Social Affairs, 1998).
- In **Luxembourg**<sup>2</sup> 17% of sick days in the service and retail sectors are caused by psychosomatic problems.
- In the **Netherlands** in 1998, mental disorders were the main cause of incapacity (32%)<sup>3</sup>. The cost of work-related psychological illness is estimated at 2.26 million euros a year<sup>4</sup>.
- In a national survey in the **UK** (HSE, 2000), one in five workers were 'extremely' or 'very' stressed as a result of occupational factors. Also in the UK, stress-related illness is responsible for the loss of 6.5 million working days each year costing employers around 571 million euros and society as a whole as much as 5.7 billion euros.
- In **Sweden** in 1999, 14% of 15,000 workers on long term sick leave said the reason was stress and mental strain. (The corresponding figure in 1998 was 11.7%). The total cost of sick leave to the state in 1999 was 2.7 billion euros. This figure is expected to double in 2003 (National Social Insurance Board, 1999).
- A conservative estimate of the costs at **European level** amounts to 20 billion euros a year.

The European Institutions have taken an active interest in stress and related topics like harassment in recent years. In 1997, the Advisory Committee for Safety, Hygiene and Health at Work adopted an opinion on stress, calling for the Commission to draw up a voluntary guidance document. That guidance was published in 2000. This year (2002), stress is the theme of the Bilbao Agency's European Week. The European Parliament published a report on harassment at the workplace in July 2001 and the Advisory Committee adopted an opinion on violence at the workplace in November the same year. The European Council of Health Ministers in its recent "Conclusions"<sup>5</sup> (2001) invited the EU Member States to "give special attention to the increasing problem of work-related stress and depression" and the Commission to take action in the context of the public health programmes.

In its recent European strategy on health and safety<sup>6</sup> the European Commission announces that it will open consultations with the social partners on stress and its effects on health and safety at work, under the procedure laid down in Article 138 of the Treaty. A European Parliament hearing on the

European strategy on 19 June 2002 also included a discussion of stress issues.

The TUTB sees stress as an acute problem in Europe, not least due to increasing work intensification and job insecurity due to company restructuring and adaptation of flexible forms of work organization. It is evident from the last European survey, that work stress is not being sufficiently controlled in Europe, if at all in some Member States, and that stricter prevention policies must be applied.

The TUTB commissioned a study on stress in March 2002, addressed to its EU affiliates and European Federations, aiming to report on stress prevention initiatives in Europe and identify future needs for European actions. In November 2001, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions carried out a European survey on "Work-related stress and industrial relations"<sup>7</sup> in the framework of its industrial relations observatory. This article uses a combination of analysis data from both studies as a basis for illustrating the current situation and needs for future prevention strategies in Europe.



For further information on the European Week 2002, see the Bilbao Agency web site: [Osha.eu.int/ew2002](http://Osha.eu.int/ew2002)

### Time pressure and stress go together

- **Austria:** 1,255,000 workers reported suffering from work-related stress associated with time pressure (Federal Chamber of Labour and Austrian Trade Union Federation, 2000).
- **Denmark:** 8.2% of a representative sample of employees reported being «often» emotionally exhausted and 31.6% reported being «sometimes» emotionally exhausted (PUMA study, National Working Environment Institute, AMI, 2001).
- **Germany:** 98% of works councils claimed that stress and pressure of work had increased in recent years, and 85% cited longer working hours (IG Metall 2000).
- **Spain:** 31.8% of workers described their work as stressful (*Survey on Quality of Life in the Workplace*, Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs, 2001).
- **Sweden:** 9 out of 10 white-collar workers report working against the clock in their daily tasks, 40% skip lunch breaks (*Survey report : Stressed out, committed to work and burn out, or bored and healthy – must one choose ?*, TCO, 2000).

### Legal framework

Stress is not mentioned as such in the European legislation. Framework Directive 89/391/EEC lays down the employer's general obligations to ensure

the health and safety of workers in every aspect related to the work. Specifically, it requires the employer to 'adapt the work to the individual especially as regards (...) the choice of working and production methods, with a view, in particular, to

<sup>5</sup> Council conclusions of 15 November 2001 on combating stress and depression-related problems.

<sup>6</sup> Communication from the Commission, *Adapting to change in work and society: a new Community strategy on health and safety at work 2002-2006*, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Clara Llorens, ISTAS/QUIT-UAB and Daniel Ortiz de Villacian, QUIT-UAB, *Work-related stress and industrial relations*, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2001.

The results of the national reports can be found at : <http://www.euro.eurofound.eu.int/2001/11/study/index.html>

alleviating monotonous work and work at a predetermined work-rate and to reducing their effect on health'.

No European country expressly refers to work-related stress in its regulations. Two quite recent regulations in Europe laid down more specific obligations on employers to prevent psychosocial risks. In Sweden, in particular, employers must make a prior assessment of health and safety impacts before introducing organizational changes. Mental injury was also acknowledged as accompanying any type of accident (Sweden, 2001<sup>8</sup>). Austrian employers now have a duty to employ psychologists in their prevention services, with occupational doctors and safety officers, for up to 25% of prevention duty time, depending on the company's workload (Austria, 2002). A regulation set to be published in Finland this autumn will address wellbeing at work generally.

Other countries (Belgium, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands) extended the Framework Directive's provisions in their national regulations to place a general duty on employers to act against psychosocial factors that can have adverse effects on workers' mental health.

Three countries - France, Sweden and Belgium - have taken legislative initiatives on another aspect of stress : 'psychological harassment'.

The European Commission, in its health and safety strategy, acknowledged the increase in psychosocial problems and illness, and the threat they pose to the health, safety and wellbeing of workers. It says that the various forms of psychological harassment and violence at work require legislative action.

### Indirect provisions for stress-related aspects in European legislation

#### ■ Framework Directive 89/391/EEC

Article 6, General obligations on employers :  
§ 2 (d)

"adapting the work to the individual, especially as regards the design of workplaces, the choice of work equipment and the choice of working and production methods, with a view, in particular, to alleviating monotonous work and work at a predetermined work-rate and to reducing their effect on health."

§ 3 (c)

"ensure that the planning and introduction of new technologies are the subject of consultation with the workers and/or their representatives, as regards the consequences of the choice of equipment, the working conditions and the working environment for the safety and health of workers."

#### ■ Display Screen Directive 87/391/EEC

Article 3, § 1 : Analysis of workstations

"employers shall be obliged to perform an analysis of workstations in order to evaluate the safety and health conditions to which they give rise for their workers, particularly as regards possible risks to eyesight, physical problems and problems of **mental stress**."

#### ■ Organisation of Working Time Directive 93/104/EC - Article 13 : Pattern of work

"Member States shall take the measures necessary to ensure that an employer who intends to organize work according to a certain pattern takes account of the general principle of adapting work to the worker, with a view, in particular, to alleviating monotonous work and work at a predetermined work-rate, depending on the type of activity, and of safety and health requirements, especially as regards breaks during working time."

<sup>8</sup> The new regulation AFS 2001:1: "Systematic work environment management" can be found in English at: <http://www.av.se/English/legislation/afs/eng0101.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Levi, L and I., *Guidance on Work-Related Stress. Spice of Life, or Kiss of Death?*, Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> The same definition was agreed in the opinion of the Advisory Committee on work-related stress.

### EU Guidance on work-related stress

The development of European guidance on work-related stress<sup>9</sup> came as a result of the Luxembourg Advisory Committee's opinion on stress. The guidance comprises background on the concepts of stress, a checklist of stressors at the workplace and finally a short presentation on examples of prevention.

The European Commission guidance defines stress as : *"a pattern of emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physiological reactions to adverse and noxious aspects of work content, work organization and work environment. It is a state characterized by high levels of arousal and distress and often by feelings of not coping"*<sup>10</sup>. The guidance acknowledges two types of stress: positive

(healthy) stress that stimulates individuals and prepares them for the demands of work, that are then seen as 'challenges'; and negative stress (excessive, and with no control over work) that can have adverse effects on human health. Although the book focuses on company measures, it also mentions person-oriented measures like physical training, health promotion, relaxation techniques and personal stress management. These two references in the guidance may allow employers to interpret stress problems at the workplace incorrectly, and thus shift the focus onto the individual.

Also, productivity is cited throughout as a reason for action to prevent stress, and a key criterion for assessing the effectiveness of interventions. Granted, productivity should not be disregarded, but nor should it be the primary aim of stress prevention measures or a parameter of critical evaluation. The focus and benchmark should always be safeguarding the physical and mental health and well-being of workers.

The guidance does not offer a complete assessment methodology itself, but instead refers to risk assessment tools, namely checklists and questionnaires on work factors and stress management. It also provides a checklist of types of work-related stressors and suggests some organizational prevention principles like participatory management, job redesign, flexible work schedules and career development. But the suggestions and examples it offers do not fully take into account recent concerns raised by the research community and trade unions about the health and safety effects of new forms of work organization.

In fact, the European guidance has had little impact at national level, where it has tended more to provide prevention experts with a scientific basis for stress issues and basically acknowledged the European dimension of the problem. It is difficult to assess its impact on interventions for stress prevention at workplace, or even national, level. Its contribution to practical prevention initiatives in Europe is questionable. But nor was this its aim. It set out to advise on work-related stress rather than on stress prevention. This was made clear in the introduction, which said that a general framework for action was being offered (in fact, this amounted to less than 15% of the total length of the book).

It also has to be said that the limited distribution and different language versions of the guidance may have held back its dissemination and impact at national level.

## Stress recognition in Europe – See you in court !

Both the Commission's Guidance on work-related stress and the Report on work-related stress<sup>11</sup> put out by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work refer to manifestations of ill health and specific disorders associated with stress, including coronary heart disease, musculoskeletal disorders, gastrointestinal diseases, anxiety and depressive disorders and even suicide.

No country in Europe lists stress-related illnesses in its official schedule of occupational diseases. In Italy, new legislation passed in 2000 to reform the INAIL<sup>12</sup> provides that protection against workplace accidents and work-related illness should be extended to include 'biological damage', meaning psycho-physical harm to the worker. In countries with a mixed recognition system, compensation may still be available for a non-scheduled disease if work-related causality can be established. Theoretically this could apply to stress-related diseases. The only way to obtain recognition for stress related to psychosocial factors in other countries, also considering the differences in national compensation systems, is through the courts (e.g., the UK, Italy and Ireland) or through the public health system via a claim for invalidity (the Netherlands).

This is illustrated by two recent court cases. In October 2000, an Italian court granted a worker compensation for a heart attack caused by overwork, which was considered as an occupational accident. In the UK, in May 2001, two council workers were awarded 174,000 euros (£111,000) compensation for stress-related illnesses caused by overload due to staff shortage, insufficient training and no recuperation opportunities at work.

The European Recommendation for a schedule of occupational diseases does not include stress-related diseases. In its recent proposal for an amendment<sup>13</sup>, the Commission said that, rather than include them in the list, research should be promoted into disorders of a psychosocial nature.

## Stress prevention – A trade union priority

Trade unions were active on stress prevention long before the European Guidance was published. In some countries, especially in southern Europe, trade unions still regard traditional risks, like chemical and safety hazards, as their basic priorities. But there is a growing acceptance of the contribution of stress to occupational accidents

<sup>11</sup> Tom Cox, Amanda Griffiths, *et al.*, *Research on work-related stress*, Institute of Work, Health & Organisations, University of Nottingham, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> National Institute for Insurance Against Workplace Accidents (Istituto Nazionale per l'Assicurazione degli Infortuni sul Lavoro), <http://www.inail.it>. The revising legislation can be found in Italian in : <http://www.minlavoro.it/norme/13>.

<sup>13</sup> Updating of the European schedule of occupational diseases (Commission recommendation 90/326/EEC of 22 May 1990). Commission proposal (DG EMPL/D/5).

and diseases, so stress and stress-related factors are gaining increasing importance and rising up the trade union agenda.

Trade union initiatives across Europe have been basically **information-spreading activities**, through the publication of material, releasing CDs, training, information days and regional campaigns.

**Trade unions working with experts have developed guides and screening procedures for identifying psychosocial risks and workplace intervention (Spain, Austria, Denmark), and carried out sectoral and cross-sectoral studies (France, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Sweden, Spain, Finland, Greece, Portugal).** In Belgium, for example, the FGTB carried out a large-scale cross-sectoral survey<sup>14</sup> in 1999 that involved 214 enterprises and 13 sectors, receiving almost 10,000 responses. The ten basic causes identified for stress were: lack of personnel, high demands on quality, non-replacement of employees on sick leave, systematic medical checks on workers on sick leave that showed lack of trust, no scope for intervening on production methods, no promotion prospects, and a generally uncertain future.

More innovative initiatives include the development of software, the 'Workload barometer' (Quick Scan Werkdruk 3.0<sup>15</sup>) based on a scientifically validated assessment method for workload (Netherlands). Also observatories have been set up to monitor cases of stress and bullying at the workplace (Italy, France). Finally, trade unions have developed expert counselling and support services for workers affected by psychological harassment in particular (Austria, Netherlands, Luxembourg).

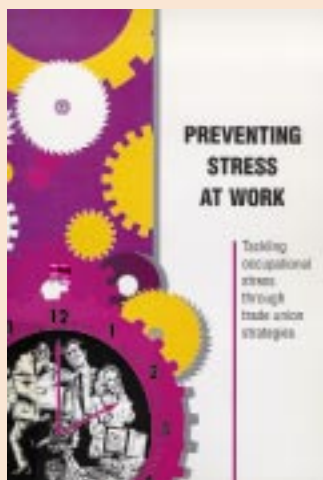
Very few trade unions took a holistic approach to stress prevention; most focused on psychological harassment or workload in line with their national legislative provisions on prevention.

Stress does not discriminate – it can affect workers in **all sectors of industry**. Traditionally, white-collar unions have been more active on stress prevention. Sectoral surveys carried out by trade unions in Europe have basically looked at health care, office work and banking, transport, retail and education. But the growth of time pressures across a wide range of sectors in Europe has focused the efforts of different industry unions on stress prevention. For example, the German metalworkers union (IG Metall) has been running a vigorous campaign for two years with the telling title: "The company: A place of crime - Psychological loads - A terror for the soul". In Spain, ISTAS - the research institute affiliated to

CC.OO – carried out qualitative research<sup>16</sup> into stress at work and psychosocial factors two years ago. The project identified nine sectors/occupations as especially stressful, namely: retail workers, transport workers, nurses and nurse assistants, teachers, hospitality, lean production workers, data entry employees, cashiers and attendants. In the Netherlands, a survey<sup>17</sup> (PhD thesis : *Stress a new trade union topic. Examples of trade union initiatives in the Dutch service sector*) on intensification of work and workload carried out by a trade union expert, examined eight service sectors - banking, retail, pharmacies, tourism organisations, printing shops and the audiovisual sector - some of which, like pharmacies, had never really been studied before. In Austria, the Federal Employees Association (BAK) set up a permanent expert advisory body for the railway unions to deal with issues of job design, working time and psychosomatic health.

At European Industry Federation level, the ESF (European Transport Workers Federation) launched a European "fatigue kills" campaign as part of an international campaign on working and driving hours in road transport. Time pressure and just-in-time delivery, as a result of fierce competition in the sector, was held to be a major source of stress and cause of accidents. Also a special campaign was launched to tackle bullying and abuse of women, who are often a minority in the transport sector. A civil aviation campaign - "Zero Air Rage" - was also launched in 2000 focused on aggressive and dangerous passengers. The European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) has launched a campaign on the implementation of the working time directive in the health care area, with a special focus on doctors in training. According to the campaign 'Strengthen the EU Working Time Directive : Stop dangerous operations in the workplace', long hours often result in stress-related illness which also endangers patients.

In some countries - notably Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK - stress is included in **collective agreements**. Most of the stress-related provisions focus more on procedural aspects (i.e., identification of stressors, carrying out surveys) than setting clear obligations for employers or objectives for stress reduction (with some exceptions, like the Netherlands). The few existing collective agreements deal with aspects that are already covered by national regulations. The trade unions aim to take action on psychosocial risk factors by introducing provisions on relevant aspects of work organization (workload and intensity of work, working time, breaks and rests).



<sup>14</sup> *Guide de campagne: Comment la charge de travail se transforme-t-elle en stress ?*, Octobre 1999, La Centrale générale FGTB.

<sup>15</sup> Reference books : H. Pennock, E. Brouwer, *Werkdruk: van plan van aanpak tot implementatie*. V. Vrooland, M. Wilders, *Werkdruk voor ondernemingsraden: succes en faalfactoren*.

<sup>16</sup> *Identification de facteurs de riesgo psicosocial en distintos colectivos*, ISTAS, 2000.

<sup>17</sup> J. Warning, *Werkdruk nieuw vakbondsthema*, Zeist, Uitgeverij Kerckebosch, 2000. (Reference documents : Summary in English by the author, Belgian report on this study, French translation by Marianne De Troyer, ULB.)



## International activities – ILO and 'SOLVE'

ILO has recently launched the 'SOLVE' training package under the SafeWork program to address psychosocial problems at work. SOLVE treats stress, tobacco, alcohol & drugs, HIV-Aids and violence at work as inter-related aspects that can influence workers' health.

SOLVE wants companies to bring in a comprehensive policy to address all these issues. The ILO argues that reducing or eliminating one can reduce the incidence and severity of others. Special modules for preventive action - 'Microsolves' - are being developed to target each of the five identified areas of SOLVE.

So far, seven modules are planned for preventing sexual harassment, negative stress and discrimination against HIV-positive workers in manufacturing industry.

Modules covering other sectors and areas will be developed in the coming years.

*The inter-relationships between these areas are not made clear in the ILO project. This could lead to misconceptions and endorsement of an individual-focused policy to address psychosocial issues that are linked to work organisation.*

For more details, contact : International Labour Office, InFocus Safework, 1211 Geneva 22, Switzerland, Tel.: +41-22-7996715, Fax : +41-22-799-6878, <http://www.ilo.org/safework>

## Trade Union publications on stress prevention

### Belgium

■ *Harcèlement au travail. Une réponse syndicale*, Brussels, FGTB, 2002, 48 p.

■ *Stress, agir pour le bien-être au travail*, Brussels, FGTB, 1999, 80 p.

### Germany

■ *Runter mit dem Dauerstress !*, Frankfurt-am-Main, IGM, 2000, 38 p.

■ Pickshaus, K., Schmitthenner, H., Urben, H., *Arbeiten ohne Ende*, IGM, 2001.

### Netherlands

■ Popma, J., *Stress, well-being and the Framework Directive. The Dutch Experience*, Brussels, TUTB, 1998, 32 p.

■ Warning, J., *Werkdruk nieuw vakbondsthema*, Zeist, Uitgeverij Kerckebosch, 2000, 354 p.

### Italy

■ Salerno, S., Tartaglia, R., Maremmani, R., *Pesare il carico mentale per prevenire la fatica mentale*, IIMS, INAIL, ISPEL, CGIL, CISL, UGL, UNIONQUADRI and CONFAGRICOLATURA, 2000, 27 p.

### Ireland

■ Armstrong, J., *Workplace stress in Ireland*, Dublin, ICTU, 2001, 32 p.

### Spain

■ *Estrés ocupacional*, produced and published by UGT-País Valenciano.

■ *Estrés laboral : guía para la prevención de riesgos laborales*, published by UGT's Confederal Executive Committee.

### United Kingdom

■ *Preventing stress at work: an MSF guide*, Herts, MSF, 1995, 24 p.

■ Cox, T., Griffiths, A., Barlow, C., *Work-related stress in manual workers : a heavy load*, London, UNISON, 1996, 43 p.

■ *Tackling stress at work: a UNISON/TUC guide for safety reps and union negotiators*, London, TUC, 1998, 20 p.

■ *What makes bus driving stressful? : a survey of Sheffield bus drivers*, London, T&G, 1998, 61 p.

■ *Work-related stress : an introduction*, Manchester, Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied workers (USDAW), 1999, 41 p.

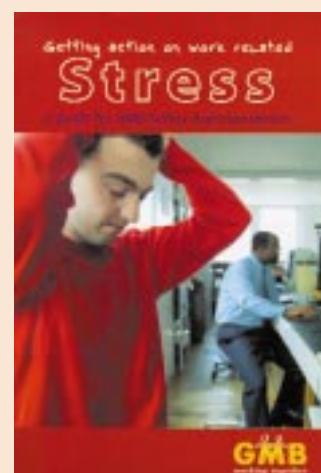
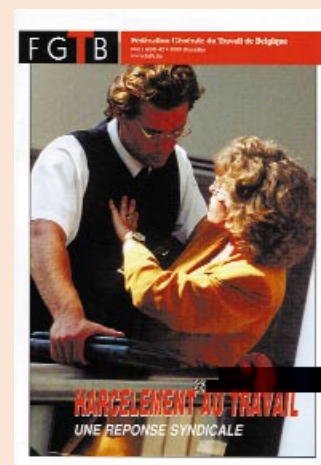
■ *Stress at work: a guide for UNISON safety representatives on prevention members*, London, UNISON, 2000, 21 p.

■ *Working alone. A health and safety guide on lone working for safety representatives*, London, UNISON, 2000, 30 p.

■ *Getting action on work related stress : a guide for GMB safety representatives*, London, GMB, 2001, 37 p.

### International

■ *Preventing stress at work : tackling occupational stress through trade union strategies*, Geneva, FIET, 1994, 74 p.



## TUTB Questionnaire on stress prevention in Europe

The questionnaire was sent to the members of the Workers Group of the Advisory Committee on Safety and Health in March 2002 and to the European Federations in June 2002. It aimed to collect information on the national impact of the European guidance on stress, relevant trade union activities and prevention aspects and needs for future strategies including trade union problems when dealing with stress at workplaces.

At national level, responses were received from : OGB and BAK (Austria), FGTB (Belgium), CGT (France), IG Metall (Germany), FNV (Netherlands), CC.OO (Spain), UGT (Spain), SIF (Sweden) and TUC (UK). At European Industry Federation level, responses were received from ESF and EPSU.

### Coping with stress in Europe - Obstacles to prevention

Most stress prevention approaches in the EU today are oriented towards secondary (reduction of stress effects on health) or tertiary prevention (treat the resulting illness). Primary prevention is scarce in Europe.

Although various stressors, including organizational, physical, psychological and psychosocial factors, are not excluded from the scope of the **risk assessment** required by the Framework Directive (89/391/EEC), the fact is that such factors are still not being routinely included in risk assessments by health and safety committees and prevention practitioners. The EC 'Guidance on risk assessment at work'<sup>18</sup> published in 1996, intended to provide advice on practical aspects of the Framework Directive risk assessment, briefly turns its attention to psychological factors in Annex 1A. But the list of factors is limited, and the guidance itself, of course, does not set a mandatory minimum content for the risk assessment. It is merely a European Commission publication which does not even reflect the opinion of the Commission.

Spanish trade unions demanded the inclusion of psychosocial factors in risk assessment via the national collective agreement. Recent national regulations in Sweden and Austria gave impetus to trade unions to push for stress to be included in risk assessments.

With the odd exception, nowhere in Europe do **inspectors** generally deal with such factors, due to lack of human resources or/and insufficient training. And even where they do, very few countries actually use specific instruments or include stress data in their annual reports.

use the new regulations to combat stress by blocking staffing cuts in a public nursing home until a risk assessment has been done showing that the health and safety consequences will be acceptable. In the Netherlands, inspectors have since last year been using the so-called 'internal instruction' document that covers elementary aspects of stress. Similar instructions exist for aggression and violence at work and sexual intimidation. An amendment to the system of financial penalties enables them to impose a spot fine on non-compliant companies. In Denmark, inspection authorities use special assessment tools for psychosocial aspects in the education and health care sectors.

Some national authorities have set objectives for stress prevention. National covenants (tripartite agreements) in the Netherlands, for example, have set an aim of reducing the numbers confronted with high work pressure by 10% by 2003. Portugal has made reducing depression and other work organization-related psychological problems its number one objective. In its Work Environment Plan 2000-2002, Sweden's Labour Inspectorate is targeting supervisory measures on the 5% of work sites where stress is greatest.

In Finland, a national research and action program called 'Wellbeing at Work' (2000-2003) has been launched by the government involving four ministries, the social partners and other interest groups. The project aims to promote wellbeing at work and quality of life, focusing on job satisfaction and mental wellbeing. It operates on four levels: information provision, research and utilization of research findings, support and funding of development projects and legislation development and monitoring.

Good practice by **health and safety authorities** is thin on the ground in Europe. One example is in Sweden, where authorities have begun to proactively

The **problems** that trade unions face in Europe when dealing with stress at work are many and various. Briefly - there is a shortage of knowledge

<sup>18</sup> *Guidance on risk assessment at work*, Luxembourg, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 1996.

and qualified experts, an increasing lack of workers' control over work organisation as restructuring and unemployment spread throughout Europe, and finally individualization of stress problems and reactive approaches after workers have been injured. Trade unions also feel that new forms of work organization and new technology are gradually undermining workers' dignity by violating their privacy and other fundamental rights. Employers, too, want to retain sole control over all aspects of work organization.

Trade unions consider stress and mental health as very complex subjects to deal with. They lack the official support they need to develop prevention strategies. There is also a lack of scientifically validated methods for identifying stressors at work and acting at the workplace.

The lack of recognized psychological diseases is also hindering prevention actions in Europe. Even now, stress is regarded as an individual problem caused by personality and personal factors. Current prevention strategies in Europe - where they exist - focus on individuals and rarely promote risk screening at workplaces.

Trade unions have basically identified 3 types of **future strategy** to improve stress prevention in Europe. The first comprises initiatives to improve knowledge about stress. *Knowledge among experts*, where there is a need for intensive training for prevention practitioners, workers and inspectors and development of valid methodologies and *knowledge about the effects of stress*, where more focused surveys are required.

The second comprises initiatives to get a more *binding European framework for stress prevention and recognition*. This would include mandatory, practical and more detailed - in terms of prevention aspects - EU guidelines (Austria), clarification of employers' legal duties (UK) and even a special directive for stress prevention (Greece). Trade unions also want to include diseases caused by work-related stress in the schedule of European recognized diseases (France, Portugal, Spain). This would recognize the right of affected employees to sick leave and medical services.

The third comprises initiatives to *enhance the prevention activity of workers' health and safety reps by giving them more say over work organization* and their levers of pressure (e.g., stopping work where workers' mental health is at risk, facilitating victims' compensation where the employer has not conducted a sufficient risk assessment), etc. This may require appropriate changes in the Framework Directive.



Finally, initiatives that signal a stronger commitment by the European Institutions to combatting stress, such as setting up permanent working groups in the Advisory Committee, Dublin Foundation and Bilbao Agency, were suggested. Also, improving community within workplaces can break the isolation of workers and subsequent individualization of stress problems.

### TUTB proposals for European policies

To summarize, trade unions' basic aims for stress prevention at European level should be to :

- Set concrete stress prevention obligations for employers.
- Clarify the contents of the risk assessment (include various stress factors).
- Improve legislation on ergonomics to also include mental load, psychological and psychosocial aspects (work pace, decision-making discretion, autonomy, etc.) that can lead to stress, contribute to MSD and increase the risk of accidents.
- Strengthen trade unions and workers' reps' roles and influence on work organization, especially where changes are to be made (e.g., downsizing, work intensification, etc.).
- Promote training and awareness for workers on stress-related risks at the workplace.
- Promote multidisciplinary prevention services, including psychologists.
- Establish a framework to assess and tackle risk factors for stress which is geared to primary prevention and not focused on the individual.
- Establish proactive procedures for collecting stress-related complaints at workplace level.
- Ensure workers' right to sick leave on work-related stress grounds and rehabilitation.

Some of the above objectives should be achieved by amending existing legislation or bringing in new regulations at European level. ■