

## IMPROVING THE WAY A TRADE UNION DEALS WITH HEALTH AND SAFETY QUESTIONS SUCH AS MSDS

### Organisation

The National Federation of Construction and Wood (Fédération Nationale Construction Bois – FNCB) sector – of the French and Democratic Confederation of Labour (Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail – CFTD)

### Introduction

Gautier manufactures furniture in the Pays de la Loire region of France. It employs 826 persons (2005 figures) spread over two production areas, two warehouses, two subsidiaries and one commercial subsidiary.

The last figures (2005), regarding the main cases of occupational diseases within employees in this industry that the main problems are due to work-related musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs):

Table 1 Cases of occupational diseases reported in 2005

Cause	Number of cases
Articular diseases	1 989
Asbestos	116
Lumbar vertebrae, handling	91
Deafness	82
Bronchial disorder, silica	49
Wooden dust	31
Breast cancer, asbestos	21

This is a just-in-time organisation of labour. Due to the low unemployment rate in the region, young people do not necessarily stay a long time within the enterprise. There are 396 employees aged between 40 and 54, 337 persons aged between 25 and 39 and 93 persons aged of less 24.

In 2005, 458 workers were put under special medical supervision due to being exposed to risks in the workplace. Prevention is already important within the company. It employs a safety moderator and a male nurse and has a Committee for Working Conditions, Safety and Hygiene. Three workers have

had their disease recognised as occupational disease. There is a good social climate within the enterprise.

Diseases linked to the musculoskeletal system, identified within the framework of the French system of occupational diseases are the most common occupational diseases in this company. In addition to the recorded problems, there is a hidden aspect due to undeclared cases and absenteeism provoked by MSDs.

## **Aims**

The Gautier branch of the French Democratic Confederation of Labour (CFDT) union decided to get involved in issues regarding working conditions and more particularly in health and safety issues such as MSDs.

## **What was done, and how**

### ***At Gautier***

Further to the FNCCB's (Fédération Nationale Construction Bois) proposal, the Gautier union branch agreed to lead an exemplary action, which will possibly be used as a model to encourage other union branches to act on occupational safety and health issues.

An elected worker of the union branch who is a member of the Committee for Working Conditions, Safety and Hygiene has been trained in health and safety and MSD issues. The course is a 24-month training programme made up of seven modules, each of three days, and trainees take advantage of the periods between the sessions to develop their project in this field.

### **Stage1: Assessment of accidents and diseases in the enterprise.**

The CFDT union branch started to make an assessment of both health and safety at work and organisation of prevention within the enterprise by collecting all data about industrial accidents and occupational diseases and by interviewing persons in charge of prevention (e.g., the company nurse). Studying these data, the CFDT union branch team realised the importance of occupational diseases and workers' complaints linked to MSDs and decided to take action on this issue.

### **Stage 2: Observation and interviews of workers**

The CFDT union branch chose two production workshops and identified workstations where workers could suffer from MSDs. They filmed and interviewed the workers concerned and analysed their movements to identify possible causes of MSDs. The union branch presented a report of their findings to workers who could then comment or correct the data.

### **Stage 3: Reflection on ways to improve the situation**

The CFDT union branch plans to put MSDs at the agenda of a meeting of the Working Conditions, Safety and Hygiene Committee and use their workstation analysis as a starting point for identifying ways to improve MSDs prevention, first at the workstations studied, then across the whole enterprise.

#### ***At the National Federation of Construction and Wood level***

The FNCB sector of the CFDT took advantage of the Gautier union branch project to improve its methods regarding the implementation of their occupational safety and health projects and to initiate the taking into consideration of the MSDs issue at the federation of construction and at the wood branch level. The CFDT followed the Gautier union branch project since the beginning. The occupational safety and health official representative of the FNCB has received the same training as the representative of the Committee for Working Conditions, Safety and Hygiene. This individual was able to analyse the progress of the CFDT union branch project and to make the most of its experience. This is used to present to union branches in other enterprises the process they should follow to improve working conditions, especially regarding MSDs. This support from the FNCB increases other union branches' awareness and encourages them to act.

In the long-term, this experience will be used to build a training tool for union branches wishing to lead an occupational safety and health project, whatever branch they belong to.

The Federation then decided to hold a one-day meeting (June 2006) on the issue of MSDs with the construction and wood branch. As a result, activists' awareness was increased regarding the MSDs issue by working on the basis of their own experience or their colleagues' complaints. The federation then trained them to improve their understanding of all angles linked to the MSDs issues, and began to initiate them to the leading of an OHS project (June 2007).



Figure 1 Use of a scissor lifter

## What was achieved

From its own occupational safety and health project experience, the CFDT union branch at Gautier has:

- made proposals for changes to the workplaces studied;
- improved its consideration of occupational safety and health problems by observing and analysing workstations precisely, and developing worker participation in this analysis and in the proposal of change;
- helped other CFDT union branches in its occupational and geographical area in order that they can use the same process to carry out the same kind of project within their enterprise.

The trade union practices within the CFDT union branch of Gautier evolved by them:

- getting involved in an occupational safety and health project;
- coming and talking to workers;
- observing work;
- interesting workers in the building of preventative solutions;

- drawing on a project process;
- developing social dialog and participation of all enterprise contributors to the seeking of a solution.

From its own experience of following the occupational safety and health project, the FNCB has:

- improved its own process support to unions branches projects linked to occupational safety and health;
- initiated an improvement process of its training “to lead an occupational safety and health process project”;
- encouraged other CFDT union branches to initiate occupational safety and health projects (by presenting the achieved process and result);
- initiated the building of a taking into consideration project linked to MSDs within the “industrial manufacture of furniture” sector in order that this issue can be run by social partners.

Trade union practices within the FNCB evolved by them:

- providing methodological support;
- developing a referents network;
- capitalising experience;
- developing social dialog about occupational safety and health.

## **Further information**

Fédération Nationale Construction Bois – Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail

47/49 avenue Simon Bolivar, 75950 Paris cedex 19, France

Contact persons: Pascal Roussel, national secretary and Laurence They, Confederal secretary

<http://www.fncb.cfdt.fr>

## **Transferability**

This kind of training can be transferred in other sectors of activity or other countries by using the same methodology.