



Healthy Workplaces Summit

Working together for risk prevention

Bilbao, 11 – 12 November 2013

Speech: Armindo Silva, Director, Employment and Social Legislation, Social Dialogue, DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, European Commission.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Unfortunately, Commissioner Andor cannot be here today with us because he was asked by President Barroso to accompany him to a meeting with Heads of State and Government to discuss youth employment.

The Commissioner asked me to thank you all, the Director Dr. Sedlatschek, the Agency staff and all those who worked in the focal points and other structures at the national level, for the hard work to make this campaign a success. The European Commission attaches a keen interest to this campaign, because it fits so clearly into the EU Policy on Health and Safety at Work, in particular the objective of promoting effective partnerships between management and workers at workplace level.

The success of the campaign is especially laudable in times when there is an increasing pressure on employment and working conditions.

When this Commission began its term of office in 2010, the main priority was to lead the European Union out of the economic and financial crisis and to achieve a job rich recovery and smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. This is still the case. The Europe 2020 Strategy sets ambitious targets for increasing employment and reducing poverty. The Commission has put in place the European Semester, the Employment Package and the Social Investment Package in order to guide the Member States in implementing their structural reforms, including their labour market reforms. A month ago, the Commission presented a Communication on Strengthening the Social Dimension of the Economic and Monetary Union.

Through these initiatives we have addressed the evolving employment and social challenges in a systematic manner and from a pan-European perspective.

However, the crisis has increased the pressure not only on employment but on working conditions as well. It is however clear that without good working conditions, and thus healthy and safe workplaces, it will not be possible to reach the ambitious goals of sustainable and inclusive growth.

In the last years, the Commission focused on the final stages of implementation of the 2007-2012 European Strategy on Health and Safety at work, including the assessment of the Strategy and the identification of the key challenges and priorities for the years to come. As part of the latter, a public consultation was launched by the Commission in May 2013. We received 523 replies which is a very good result and shows great interest in this issue. The responses cover a large span of stakeholders, including governments, social partners, NGOs, individual companies and citizens. A very large majority of respondents (93%) agreed that there is a further need to coordinate policies at EU level and 75% agreed that a new strategic policy framework was needed.

The consultation provided the Commission with suggestions on priorities and actions in order to further improve our health and safety at work policy. In particular, the Commission was asked to give more attention in the next strategic cycle to the following objectives:

- optimizing the existing EU legislative framework and its implementation, especially for SMEs;
- promoting social dialogue in the field of OSH;
- encouraging the coordination of national OSH bodies;
- ensuring the availability of EU funds to support the improvement of health and safety conditions;
- enhancing monitoring (statistical) tools to follow-up on progress made; and
- giving more focus to the prevention of occupational and work-related diseases;

The consultation further revealed the need for a holistic and integrated prevention approach, for example through the development of policies to better reintegrate injured workers into the workforce. It confirmed the importance of awareness raising campaigns like this one as part of a strategic policy framework.

The results of the public consultation together with the opinions of the Advisory Committee and of the Senior Labour Inspectors Committee, as well as the European Parliament, on top of any other relevant contribution received from Member States and social partners, will be taken into account by the Commission when preparing the future policy framework on health and safety at work.

In the legislative area we are looking closely at the consequences of the implementation of the REACH regulations for health and safety. We have proposed a set of technical amendments to 5 Directives in this area in order to reflect the changes introduced by the EU Regulation on Classification, Labeling and Packaging of Chemical Substances. Thanks to the active role played by the Lithuanian Presidency there are good prospects of starting an informal trilogue between the Council and the Parliament before the end of the year.

Evaluation work continues on the revision of the carcinogens Directive with the purpose of enabling the next Commission to take a decision on whether and to what extent modifications are needed. This is a very complex technical dossier that requires in-depth assessment of not only social but also economic impacts on a large number of sectors.

Despite having received a negative opinion signed by 11 governments, the agreement signed by the social partners in the hairdressing sector continues to be evaluated by the Commission with the aim of measuring its costs and benefits, as well as its justification on the grounds of subsidiarity.

The lower levels of compliance with OSH rules by micro and small companies continue to be challenging. Claims by several governments and stakeholders representing the business sector that current legislation has not always been designed or implemented in the least costly manner cannot be ignored by the Commission.

It is however clear that the level of protection of the health and safety of workers cannot be made dependent of the size of the undertaking where they work. The Commission will soon present a report on how Member states implement the obligation to document risk assessments especially in SMEs. This report responds to the Opinion of the High-Level Group of Independent Stakeholders on Administrative Burdens, that has asked several times the Commission to exempt very small firms undertaking certain low risk activities from such obligation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

For the Commission is very important that occupational health and safety is seen as a positive contribution to economic growth and competitiveness, and not as a burden on companies. The campaign was a success because it managed to carry this message across the whole Europe, it reached many workers and employers. Not acting costs more on a long run than taking the necessary measures to prevent risk, and thus accidents and occupational diseases.

I thank you all once more for your dedication to take part in this campaign.

