

Traditional and new risks: the challenges of promoting safety and health at work





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Author: António Brandão Guedes

Translation: Stefanie Becker

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Foreword

Dear Readers,

In 2019, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) in Bilbao celebrated its 25th anniversary. Since it was founded, it has made a highly significant contribution to preventing occupational accidents and diseases in Europe. Over the years, numerous publications and handouts on specific issues as well as regular information and awareness campaigns have meant that the social partners in particular pay more attention to prevention, together with other stakeholders involved in occupational health and safety. The European Centre for Workers' Questions (EZA) and its European network of workers' organisations have been involved in these activities as official campaign partner since 2016.

This publication presents the main results from a series of seminars held by the EZA about traditional and new risks for safety and health at work, as well as recommendations for all workers' representatives dealing with these issues. The topics range from the persistently high risk of accidents in agriculture through to psychosocial risk factors arising with the digital transformation of the world of work.

During the seminars it became clear that while digitisation brings major challenges at the workplace, it also opens up possibilities for making work less physically and mentally tiring in future. In dealing with the digital transformation, workers' organisations should not remain in a reactive role but take up a proactive stance and contribute to the social dialogue with suggestions for better occupational safety and health at the digital workplace in order to give them a chance of unfolding their positive potential.

One quintessential aspect to come out of the seminars was that despite all the progress that has been made, companies need to have an even stronger prevention culture.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the project managers from our member centres NSZZ Solidarność and Europejski Dom Spotkań - Fundacja Nowy Staw from Poland, Feder.Agri. from Italy and Nell-Breuning-Haus from Germany for the active role they played in the seminars.

António Brandão Guedes, coordinator of the Commission for Work Issues of the National Executive Committee of BASE-F.U.T. in Portugal, was responsible for coordinating the projects, giving important content-related impetus; he represented EZA at the 25th anniversary of EU-OSHA, evaluated the seminar results and wrote this final report. I would like to take this opportunity to extend our grateful thanks for his valuable commitment. He was supported by Matthias Homey, who coordinated the contents of the activities for the EZA Secretariat.

My special thanks also go to the EU-OSHA for our campaign partnership that has enriched the contents of our seminars on safety and health at work, and also for the fact that this year once more, our seminars were attended by representatives from the national focal points.

We hope that this brochure with its results and recommendations may provide workers' organisations and their multipliers with suggestions for their daily work. As ever, we gladly welcome any feedback and proposals.

Sigrid Schraml
EZA Secretary-General

Introduction

The EZA education programme 2019 included a number of seminars that aimed to examine questions related to promoting workers' safety and health. As already in 2015, the European Centre for Workers' Questions (EZA) once more invited me to be responsible for coordinating the contents of these seminars.

I attended the following seminars in an active role and produced the respective reports:

- 19 to 21 September 2019: international seminar held by KK NSZZ Solidarność (Komisja Krajowa NSZZ Solidarność) in Warsaw (Poland) on “Health policy: an alternative or prerequisite for a stable labour market?”
- 27 to 29 September 2019: international seminar held by FEDER.AGRI. (Federazione Nazionale per lo Sviluppo dell'Agricoltura) in Bari (Italy) on “Health and safety at work in agriculture: workers' protection in EU policy”
- 6 to 9 February 2020: international seminar held by Europejski Dom Spotkań – Fundacja Nowy Staw in Lublin (Poland) on “Managing psychosocial risks in the work environment”
- 18 to 21 February 2020: international seminar held by Nell-Breuning-Haus (NBH) in Herzogenrath (Germany) on “Digitisation and psychological stress at the workplace: a neglected aspect in social dialogue?”

At these four seminars, we tried to find out which topics the various countries share, which new and old aspects of safety and health at work are still relevant, how these aspects are being treated and whether there are prospects, approaches, good practice, exchange of experience and challenges for the future.

1 Persistence of traditional occupational safety and health risks

During our debate about promoting workers' safety and health in the EZA network, it transpired that traditional topics are still a problem in several countries and continue to be the focus of discussions, particularly in Southern, Central and Eastern Europe. Some of these problems are being solved, whereas others have intensified as a result of globalisation, particularly as a result of phenomena such as migration, deteriorating health systems, the unemployment rate and the austerity measures affecting several countries of the European Union.

1.1 Working conditions in agriculture and exploitation of workers

In this context, reference is made to one of the main topics of the seminar in Bari which discussed the exploitation of Italian and migrant workers in agriculture. The clandestine exploitation of workers is a phenomenon that is affecting not just Italians and that is occurring throughout Italy and especially in regions having a higher degree of agricultural activity. It is associated with criminal networks that exploit vulnerable people with a particular focus on minors, women and migrants for the sake of making the greatest possible profit. Some experts examined this problem in relation to work accidents in agriculture. Statistics about undeclared workers are not available, particularly with regard to work accidents. We only hear about it when they arrive injured or dead in the hospitals.

This reflects the old problems of decent working conditions, with the difficulties encountered by the state and agricultural organisations, particularly those of Christian origin such as the Movimento Cristiano Lavoratori/FEDER.AGRI., in combating illegal employment where it is so difficult to ensure the safety and health of the workers.

The authorities have to collaborate in their fight against the criminal organisations who exploit workers, while at the same time supporting farmers' organisations in admitting migrants and helping them to achieve legal status.

1.2 Prevention of occupational diseases and work accidents in agriculture

The seminar in Bari also highlighted the importance of preventing occupational diseases in the agricultural sector, drawing attention to the fact that farm workers know nothing about the chemical and biological substances to which they are exposed. The problem is compounded by the large number of smallholder farmers and work migrants in Italy and other southern countries. In this context, the greatest challenge was said to be the considerable costs involved in applying the prevention legislation: requirements are made in terms of protective equipment, modernising the work gear, accommodation and sanitary conditions. The state must invest more in the health conditions for these workers.

Work accidents with machines such as tractors led to real tragedies, in Italy and also in Portugal and Spain. Although the statistics available for Portugal are not very precise, they indicate that there have been hundreds of severe and fatal accidents with tractors since the

start of the new millennium. This situation even prompted the Portuguese parliament to adopt a resolution in 2010 demanding that the government take urgent measures. In 2015 and 2016, a campaign was launched to deal with accidents and occupational diseases in agriculture and forestry, involving the labour inspectorate, the agricultural ministry and the social partners in agriculture.

At the seminar in Warsaw, mention was made of the fact that work accidents and occupational diseases in Italy, which have increased in recent years, are clear symptoms of how the quality of work is deteriorating in this country. A strong prevention culture is needed with more investment in promoting workers' safety and health. Younger and older workers are the ones who suffer most. The number of work accidents is also high in Latvia.

Another crucial topic is the difficulty that various countries have in establishing an effective system for preventing health risks in agriculture. In some cases, there are practically no systems for registering/reporting occupational diseases so that any such cases are therefore not treated as work-related illnesses. Furthermore, poor statistical systems prevent an awareness of the real situation so that suitable measures are not taken.

1.3 Health systems in Europe and demographic aspects

The seminar in Warsaw held by the Solidarność trade union analysed certain aspects of the national health systems and discussed the extent to which the promotion of safety and health at work can be put in a national framework. There were also discussions of some aspects of the Polish and Italian systems. The demographic situation in Europe was registered with great concern in view of the possible

consequences for the health systems, with all the implications for workers in general and for older people in particular. The challenge consists in improving a system that is based on the “European model” and that aims for healthy, productive workers.

Promoting safety and health at work is on a very low level in several countries, particularly in Latvia and Poland. In this context, the participants of the seminar in Warsaw explained that trade unions should encourage training for workers and employers, demand assessments of the risks to physical and mental health and also extend and improve collective bargaining processes.

The various national reports showed once more that there are great differences in terms of the respective social reality in the EU countries, both in terms of legislation and with regard to good practice. However, most countries using the Community model for promoting safety and health at work are more concerned about workers’ health. But it must be said that the health systems are being exposed to demographic pressure due to the regulations that apply in the EU, together with ageing populations and budgetary constraints.

Labour laws must be brought in line with substantial changes in the labour markets, particularly with regard to precarious employment. On the other hand, major efforts are needed to provide worker representatives with suitable courses on safety and health at work, and to train trade unionists so that they can have a greater influence on health policy at work.

2 Emergence of new safety and health risks at work

The seminars in Lublin and Herzogenrath looked particularly at psychosocial risk factors, with a focus on work-related stress. These are new risks that are increasingly significant, particularly with the transition to a digital economy.

The two seminars were mainly dedicated to psychosocial risks. A comparison was also drawn with the traditional risks involved in the lack of decent working conditions, which is still the case in Albania, Bulgaria and Romania as well as the countries in Southern Europe.

Although European and national legislation in most countries is sufficient to create a framework for preventing psychosocial risks, there is once more a question mark over how legal provisions are implemented. Major difficulties exist in actually applying the locally valid regulations, resulting not only from a lack of political will but also on account of the economic costs and the problems associated with defining suitable methods and procedures.

The different levels of economic and social development in the European countries are an essential aspect that has to be given due consideration. The legal systems are also at different levels of development, despite a number of reference points. These include the framework directive (Directive 89/391/EEC), the autonomous framework agreement on work-related stress between the European social partners (2004) and the European framework agreement on harassment and violence at work (2007), not forgetting the latest ILO Convention C190 on eliminating violence and harassment in the

world of work, which is currently being ratified by the member states of this international organisation.

Both at the seminar in Lublin and at the seminar in Herzogenrath, it was said that the current changes taking place in the world of work – including in particular the progressive digital transformation – are having an exacerbating effect on social inequalities, the possible loss of jobs and the increase in psychological disorders already predicted by the World Health Organisation. In future, our lives will be run by algorithms; increasingly, they will turn labour into a commodity with an even profounder effect on our lives. We will become less and less autonomous and witness inroads into our private lives that lead to fuzzy boundaries between work, family and social life.

2.1 Stress and psychosocial risk factors

Both seminars paid particular attention to the causes of stress and psychosocial risk factors as well as the consequences for workers' health. Psychosocial risks can be caused by the contents, pressure and pace of work, working hours, control, environment and equipment, the culture and function of an organisation, human relationships at the workplace, the role in the organisation, career development and work/life balance. Although these seminars did not delve into factors such as the type of employment relationship, the unemployment rate, the intensification of work and major emotional demands, these aspects were still observed. However, attention focused on the primary issues being dealt with in the seminars:

- a) Work contents: the actual content of work is closely linked to the emergence of stress, particularly when not related to the

worker's skills or expectations or when work is highly monotonous, scarcely creative and without any challenges.

- b) Workload and pace of work: these are closely related to the inability to meet the demands of the job. However, the opposite can also be the case. Such situations cause stress.
- c) Working hours: shift work and working at night, rigid and inflexible working hours or working hours that leave no scope for social relationships or private and family life. The seminar in Herzogenrath took an intensive look at this aspect. The digital transformation is leading to fuzzy boundaries between working hours and the time left for private and family life.
- d) Control of work: stress levels are impacted by the extent to which the worker can control the workload and pace of work, as well as other risk factors. Digitisation with ge positioning brings new methods of controlling how people work, thus reducing the degree of autonomy at work.
- e) Interpersonal relationships in the workplace: poor relationships with colleagues and line managers result in a poor work environment and cause stress. Patterns of behaviour that encourage moral or sexual harassment, degradation and violence are factors for stress and also for illnesses in the long term. In extreme cases, they can result in suicide.
- f) Role in the organisation: if there is a lack of clarity in the organisation about the various roles and responsibilities, this can also lead to conflicts and stress.

- g) Intensification of work: considerable pressure is generated by the possible difficulty of coping with large quantities of information and high workloads. The intensification of work is a frequent risk in highly competitive settings and when there is a shortage of resources (understaffing).

Although stress is not an illness, it can lead to major changes in the way in which workers think, feel and behave at work. There is a vital need to identify psychosocial risk factors at the workplace, in the company or in the context of services. Several studies have shown that work-related stress is associated with the emergence of heart diseases, compromised immune systems, musculoskeletal disorders, digestion problems and certain types of cancer. This is clearly illustrated by various studies, particularly by the Dublin Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound), the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work in Bilbao (EU-OSHA) and the European Trade Union Institute for Research (ETUI). Other EZA workshops and working groups have already looked at this question.

Both seminars focused on approaches to preventing and dealing with psychosocial risks, always from the point of view of four essential aspects:

- Identifying psychosocial risk factors
- Identifying the workers exposed to these risk factors
- Estimated occupational psychosocial risk
- Probability of workers being exposed to the occupational psychosocial risk factor

The need to include the affected workers and their organisations was emphasised repeatedly. The best way to find out whether workers are exposed to problems is to ask them. It is the people doing the work who know what the root causes are.

It is important that workers and executives do not hand over responsibility for occupational risk management to specialists. But when it comes to preventing psychosocial risks, they can and should be supported by specialists such as the company doctor and also psychologists. Executives and the workers are the main stakeholders involved in preventing and dealing with work-related risks. Simply handing over the responsibility for preventing and dealing with these risks to specialists and external or internal safety experts is doomed to fail.

Once the psychosocial risk has been identified and assessed, it is then of course necessary to draw up a prevention plan and remedial action. The measures contained in the plan must be monitored, assessed and possibly corrected in a continuous learning process that involves all stakeholders.

Various instruments are currently available for identifying and assessing psychosocial risks. They are published by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work and also by national institutions, focal points of this agency, universities etc. It is not an easy process as most countries are still in the initial stages. There are various ways of measuring stress at work and psychosocial risks. The methods are either quantitative (based on scales, surveys or other instruments) or qualitative (individual and group interviews, observations or document analysis). The method is chosen according to the characteristics of the workplace and the specific risks.

The successful approach cannot be limited to individual measures focusing on the workers, although these definitely have their justification. Most psychosocial risks result from a lack of organisation and an inadequate working environment. But this problem is still not given enough attention, not only because psychologists tend to view behavioural issues as their very own area of expertise, but also because a political challenge is involved here. Employers see the way work is organised as an area that they alone are responsible for and do not want any interference.

3 Good safety and health practice at work

The issue of “good practice” in terms of safety and health at work is one of the aspects that repeatedly comes up in these EZA seminars. It plays a particularly important role in the concerns of many companies, whereby the focus is on the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work that has been a pioneer in this context.

However, promoting good practice can lead to certain misunderstandings that should be clarified. Good practice only makes sense with regard to workplaces that comply with the national occupational safety and health legislation and that have preventive systems in place. By contrast, promoting isolated initiatives and calling them “good practice” only wastes money and leads to frustration: one-off initiatives do not prevent occupational risks. Good practice goes over and beyond the legal requirements. It includes voluntary initiatives that warrant a higher level of workers’ health, safety and well-being than intended by law. These initiatives aim to enhance workers’ well-being and are an investment in improving a company’s productivity.

During the seminar, it transpired that good practice is hard to find. As a rule, what we do find consists in experience and an exchange of experience (at times with great interest) that helps us to reflect and extend our horizons beyond our own national reality. Most good experience with prevention is to be seen in large companies that have their own internal services for safety and health at work with appropriate technical resources.

At the seminars in Lublin and Herzogenrath, there were interesting reports of relevant experience with information and communication in large companies where psychosocial risk assessment is carried out

or where at least psychologists have been asked to proceed with risk assessment and to advise workers and employers in this particular field.

The prevention of psychosocial risks still seems to be in an early stage in most cases reported from Portugal, Spain, Bulgaria, Romania, Lithuania, Poland, Albania and Italy. Good practice in this field is rare in the above-mentioned countries. Generally speaking, we are currently in a phase of knowledge dissemination with studies, surveys and assessment instruments as well as improved legislation.

4 The role of social dialogue and workers' organisations

At the European Centre for Workers' Questions (EZA), the approach for preventing work-related risks and promoting workers' safety, health and well-being is discussed in the framework of the social dialogue as a pillar of social Europe (social dialogue on the local, regional, national and European scale). This social dialogue takes place on various national and European levels but in particular at workplaces, in companies and public agencies and in the context of collective bargaining.

The weakness of trade union organisations is one of the key hurdles for social dialogue in some countries, particularly in Poland, Portugal, Spain, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania and today even in Italy. ETUI studies show that more than half of the companies in Europe do not have any structures for workers' representation. At the same time, weaknesses also exist in the structures relating to the promotion of safety and health at work, particularly in terms of workers' representatives for occupational safety and health and the committees for occupational safety and health.

It transpires that some governments fail to promote social dialogue: although they adopt laws for workers' safety and health, no measures are taken by the labour inspectorates to enforce these laws in situ. The labour inspectorates struggle not only with a lack of resources but also with legislation that is not sufficient to allow intervention when workers' rights are trampled on.

Restrictions have been put on collective bargaining in some countries such as Portugal and Spain, where collective bargaining is now used

preferably to introduce specific measures for the prevention of psychosocial risks such as preventing stress and burnout as well as moral and social harassment.

5 Final reflections and recommendations

The national health systems differ from one country to the next. However, preventing occupational illnesses is a central issue. No strict statistics are available, and the systems stipulated by law are not always implemented and enforced in situ. Millions of workers continue to work without risk assessment, with some continuing to work even when they are ill at the very workplaces that have caused their illnesses.

But satisfactory practice to promote safety and health at work in large companies cannot compensate for the difficulties experienced by small companies accounting for most of the European economy. Budgetary reasons prevent small and medium-sized companies from adopting the guidelines implemented by large companies.

Europe's farm workers continue to be exploited in the agriculture sector, a trend that is on the increase. This reality encompasses the situation of illegal work and real slavery, particularly of women and young people. As the migration phenomenon grew, there was also an increase in the number of criminal organisations bent on exploiting workers.

Illegal or undeclared employment violates human dignity, erodes democratic and social values, places an additional burden on health and social insurance systems and in the end also constitutes an assault on the economy. The states have to collaborate to devise an effective system for preventing and fighting this system that has deep cultural routes in some countries.

Another major problem is the difficulty that various countries have in establishing an effective system for preventing health risks in agriculture. In some cases, there are hardly any systems for recording/reporting occupational diseases, so that these are then not counted as such. Poor statistical systems prevent any actual knowledge of the prevailing reality so that no appropriate measures are taken. On the other hand, small companies and farms struggle to meet the high cost of suitable equipment and keeping it fit for use, together with the costs for medical examinations and other safety and health conditions. And yet workers in small companies and farms have the same right to health as workers in large companies.

Most European countries already have legal provisions for avoiding psychosocial risks in businesses and services, although it would be important to have a specific European legal framework in this area.

The biggest problem, particularly in countries that have only recently joined the EU or in accession countries, consists in inadequate implementation of labour legislation in general and occupational safety and health legislation in particular. The situation in some countries is insofar dramatic as measures to promote and protect health are not implemented in situ.

It transpired that interventions focused generally on preparing workers, in other words, measures tend to address the individual workers. This includes personal measures to consolidate their skills and to reduce the impact of stress and other risks on workers. Almost no reference was made to work organisation, work content, work environment, tasks and labour relations, nor were corresponding studies carried out.

The problem of what non-prevention actually costs was also briefly discussed. A good prevention system avoids suffering on the part of workers while also reducing the costs for the economy, for families and companies. Some of the hindrances that make it impossible to invest in prevention result from a lack of time and money. It is therefore necessary for the whole of society to get involved in establishing a prevention culture.

Digitisation is proving to be a major challenge for the management of companies, workers and their organisations. On the other hand, it also offers possibilities because, when implemented fairly, future work could entail less physical and psychological effort. In the end, what matters is that trade unions do not just react to digitisation but take up a proactive stance and make suggestions for negotiations on various levels of social dialogue at national, European and global scale in cooperation with universities and research centres.

However, digitisation and platform-based work are leading to a general increase in stress and other psychological risk factors. In turn, this is causing a greater psychosocial burden, a faster pace of work, increasingly fuzzy boundaries between work and private life, with a growth in bullying, burnout and depression. Some job groups are exposed to an extreme psychosocial risk, such as teachers, nurses and care staff, doctors and other health professionals, as well as managers and senior executives, employees and bogus self-employed and pseudo-freelancers on online platforms as well as employees dealing with the general public in the financial and social security authorities.

The EU must also strongly support a fair transition to the digital economy by consolidating workers' skills, justice and social cohesion. There is a need in particular to investigate the impacts on workers' health and to create incentives for good practice in the field of pre-

vention. It will be important to include measures for preventing psychosocial risks in the Community Strategy on Safety and Health at Work for the period from 2021 to 2027, and in pursuing the various national strategies.

Psychological risk factors therefore need thorough assessment in the following four basic areas: contents, work pace and workload, work organisation, labour relations and work environment. There is a general tendency to diminish the significance of how work is organised. But this is exactly where most investments are needed, even if it raises the greatest political problems. Employers have traditionally never been keen on discussing trade union solutions and suggestions for how work is organised.

But it is also important to insist on bolstering the national systems for preventing and promoting safety and health at work. Asserting the legal regulations in businesses and services is crucial.

Too little attention has been paid to the role of the labour inspectorates, particularly regarding their needs in terms of modernisation and training to enable them to perform their tasks of checking the efficacy of labour legislation, above all in the context of digital transformation.

In the end, what matters is that trade unions are not just reacting to the digital transformation but take up a proactive stance and make suggestions for negotiations on various levels of social dialogue at national, European and global scale in cooperation with universities and research centres.

The old and new risks still persisting at European workplaces demand a high degree of commitment on the part of all workers' organisa-

tions. The greatest challenge is to ensure their actual presence in all businesses and services in Europe, both on the trade union level and also on the level of workers' representation bodies for occupational safety and health.

The EZA seminars 2019 ended around the time when the coronavirus had just started to spread to several countries. The possibility of more frequent and more severe future pandemics constitutes a whole set of new challenges for preventing occupational risks, making it necessary to view health at the workplace not just as a problem for the companies but also for public health in general.

2019 – 25th anniversary of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA)

The celebrations for the 25th anniversary of the EU-OSHA were held on 5 June 2019 in Bilbao, Spain. The author had the honour of representing the European Centre for Workers' Questions (EZA) at the celebrations and taking part in the debates.

The guests attending the event were mainly representatives of the EU-OSHA's focal points (governments), trade unions and employers' associations as well as the agency's partners, as in the case of the European Centre for Workers' Questions.

One part of the debate, with active participation primarily from former directors of the EU-OSHA and experts involved in founding the EU-OSHA in 1994, focused on the creation of the agency, as well as its history and future.

It was pointed out that the EU-OSHA was founded in the context of the European Commission's great efforts and commitment to promote safety and health at work under the auspices of Jacques Delors, who was the President of the European Commission at the time. The initial difficulties resulting from the lack of (human) resources were also highlighted, with explanations as to how the obstacles were overcome in time. Today the organisation's administration as well as the information, research and academic departments are fully staffed with experts.

At this point, it seems appropriate to recall a few important facts with regard to the creation of the agency in Bilbao. In the early 1990s, more than four million industrial accidents happened in Europe every year; eight thousand of them were fatal. The European Commission reacted to these shocking figures by declaring 1992 to be the “European Year of Safety, Hygiene and Health Protection at Work”.

The effects of this initiative resounded throughout Europe, particularly in Portugal and a few other countries. With the European Commission’s support, an exemplary effort was made to inform workers and executives to make them more aware of the issue, involving the official bodies, trade unions and employers. The initiative met with an extremely positive echo, so that the decision was taken for the work to continue in the long term. This then resulted in the creation of the agency in Bilbao, which initially had little in the way of resources but swiftly made a name for itself in terms of the first-rate work it was doing.

The framework directive 89/391/EEC, which celebrated its 30th anniversary in 2019, played a major role in this development by laying down shared principles and putting hazard assessments at the heart of legislation on safety and health protection at work.

The agency then saw dynamic development with information and awareness campaigns, originally called “European Weeks” with a focus on the information and awareness strategy for occupational safety and health protection.

The information and awareness campaigns for safety and health protection at work and the role of the European Centre for Workers' Questions

It is interesting to note that the agency's first campaign in 2000 was called "Turn your back on musculoskeletal disorders". The same topic was featured again in 2007 under the motto "Lighten the load!" and in 2020 under the motto "Healthy workplaces lighten the load" for preventing musculoskeletal disorders.

Two decades of campaigns have seen the agency improve the efficiency with which information is made available. This refers not just to the quality of information and research but also to optimising the network of partners and so-called "focal points" – national bodies coordinating and promoting the information and awareness-raising measures in each country.

The campaigns included initiatives such as the "Good Practices Award" and film evenings which were also well received and gave fresh momentum to the prevention of work-related risks. The concept of good practice did not exist in most countries. Although today there is still a certain amount of certainty as to what good practice means in terms of occupational safety and health, some companies and institutions are making an effort to not just advocate implementation of the European and national laws but to establish good practice, too, i.e. a higher level of worker welfare in some areas.

But the secret of the Bilbao agency's success consists in the tripartite governance and participative structure practised right from the start. A strong relationship of trust was established with the social partners at a very early stage, intensifying the use of local resources and also professional relationships with the social media in each country.

A recent survey in 2020 by the agency among the so-called stakeholders confirmed how positively its contribution is seen with regard to working conditions, to raising awareness and to the search for solutions in terms of occupational safety and health risks (90%).

About 85% of the survey respondents agreed that the agency sets the right priorities for occupational safety and health, and 87% are of the opinion that the work of the EU-OSHA offers an added value compared to the work of other organisations, for example at national level; 94% use the EU-OSHA's activities for at least one purpose.

In this context, the European Centre for Workers' Questions, whose annual education programme has always included the prevention of occupational risks and the promotion of occupational safety and health at work, decided to act as the agency's partner in the awareness campaigns. In recent years, agency experts and representatives have attended seminars held by the EZA network, which in turn supplied a wide range of first-rate information.

I was present at one of the most recent initiatives by the European Centre for Workers' Questions in cooperation with the agency. This was an international seminar entitled "Healthy workplaces: detecting and handling hazardous substances" that was held in Bonn from 14 to 16 March 2019. The seminar was attended by trade unionists from Portugal, Poland, France and Germany with experience in these areas.

With a new campaign on musculoskeletal disorders in 2020, the European agency once more focussed on one of the most important issues in the context of occupational diseases, affecting millions of European workers.

There is an increasingly urgent need for European legislation in this field to provide for greater prevention of these disorders that cause severe, persistent suffering to workers in numerous sectors of industry, particularly in view of the productivity losses for companies and the high economic costs for Europe's societies.

As stated by Nicolas Schmit, European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion on the occasion of the agency's 25th anniversary, we must all emphasise the information aspect of this success story as well as the creation of tools, supporting the methods of risk assessment that this institution makes available to all interested parties: company surveys (ESENER), risk assessments (OiRA), data sheets, videos (NAPO) etc. together with the pertinent, prompt information provided already in 2020 about the Covid-19 pandemic and its prevention in the workplace.