Note from the editor: [at risk: building workers' health]

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Published in:
CLR News

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):

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AT RISK: Building Workers’ Health
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Worries about workers’ rights and decent workplaces have no borders. As a result, the contributors to our quarterly come from all over the globe. However, in certain areas national or regional borders still do matter.

As the European construction trade unions began to campaign for a ban on asbestos in the late 1980s, we had to face fierce opposition not only from producers in and outside Europe but also from workers in the factories producing asbestos. And the harshest opposition came in the international federations. I remember very unfruitful and unpleasant debates in the Geneva meetings of the International Federation of Building and Woodworkers with our Canadian comrades who feared dismissals and unemployment in the asbestos plants. In the negotiations with producers we tried to convince them on a policy of substitution and the search for alternatives and, for those that refused, the ban on asbestos was the stick to hit - first in some individual countries, later on all over Europe.

During my stay at the European Parliament, I was one of the authors of a report on nanotechnology (the Report on regulatory aspects of nanomaterials) in 2009. The EP asked for inclusion of the societal dimension of the use of nanotechnology and for the protection of the health and safety of the workers involved and the consumers exposed from the cradle to the grave, at all stages of the lifecycle of these materials. The ETUC brought out a resolution on ‘nanoparticles’ in December 2010. The issue of nanomaterials has the potential to become the new asbestos-debate as there are important and related economic interests. In this issue we have the ‘state of the art’ from one of the most experienced research institutes; the IVAM has cooperated with the building trade unions in several research initiatives and
their report is a reflection of this cooperation.

As the European legislation, formulated in the framework Directive on health and safety at the workplace (Directive 89/391/EEC) and several specific directives, was concluded (in the meantime more than 20 years ago) the trade union movement in Europe played a crucial role in the debate. And, with anti-regression clauses included in the legislation we thought that we were on the ‘safe’ side of the deregulation agenda. Fabio Strambí reports on the challenges and what it brings when worker participation is sought-after.

In recent years our optimism has been tempered. The basic idea for the framework directive and related initiatives, as the underlying principles were formulated, was an idea of social progress. With general rules, minimum prescriptions for countries lagging behind and an anti-regression clause for advanced countries we thought that a strong footing was constructed for an innovative and upward-oriented strategy. We believed that this frame for a sound integration of a health and safety strategy at the workplace, combined with technological improvements in future, would guarantee workers’ safety. Rolf Gehring reports on the simplification and deregulation debate that is actually going on and that easily could undermine this strategy. The deregulation agenda has not only led to inertia instead of progress, but has even put pressure on the minimum achievements that were reached in the early days of the creation of a decent health and safety policy.

The rise of non-standard employment relations has created a segment of workers that is not visible, not represented and no longer covered by labour standards or by legislation. In a research project that is almost finalised on the working and living conditions of posted workers, health and safety aspects were just a side issue in the survey. Nevertheless, there was some indication found of a serious problem. Just to say it in one sentence, too often posted workers were confronted with an inferior work environment. We found evidence of higher risks as a result of fatigue, a result of long working hours, no training provided, no translation of health and safety rules and a lack of the necessary protective equipment. In one of the subject articles Bernd Eisenbach picks up this item based on an ongoing project.
The Bilbao Agency is an institute that works closely with the social partners. In this issue a presentation of the work of what is officially called the European Risk Observatory of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA). EU-OSHA took the initiative towards supporting policy-makers in dealing with the new challenges by organising seminars involving high-level representatives from the OSH community and from other disciplines concerned, as well as EU policy-makers and social partners.

Jörn Janssen contributes with a critical review essay on the crisis debate inspired by the book *The Crisis this Time*. In the essay he has listed at least four obvious links between the construction and financial sectors that justify why CLR readers should bother about an economic crisis book whose centre of gravitation is in the financial sector.

Without a fundamental transformation of our labour relations he sees no worldwide perspective for a structural and sustainable long-term recovery ‘the financial crisis is essentially a crisis of labour relations, which have allowed an unprecedented form of capital accumulation at the expense of wages for labour’.

We have included three reports. One is on a European debate organised by our Swiss and German friends on the consequences of the ECJ-cases. We can already announce that we will come up with more ammunition for this debate in another issue of CLR-News. Here we restrict ourselves to the theses formulated in Berlin. The two other reports deal with seminars that were dedicated to labour migration and cross border work (and to the important role industry-wide paritarian funds can play).

Finally, we have taken on board our reviews and announcements: the launch of a new book on Posting (CLR-Studies 6 In Search of Cheap Labour in Europe) during a BUIRA-meeting in London and the Annual General Meeting of CLR (AGM). Again in Brussels on the 15th April we will combine the AGM with a session of the planned EFBWWW/CLR seminar series. You will find the booking form soon on the website.

We look forward to new projects and initiatives and, as ever to your critical remarks and feedback.
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