

Hazards

UNION CAMPAIGN GETS TO GRIPS WITH STRAINS



Europe under strain



Strain injuries are Europe's number one workplace health problem. They plague traditional industries and also new industries. The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) believes something should be done. The year 2000

will see the first continent-wide union health and safety campaign. Bad employers are to experience some union arm twisting in a concerted effort to bring an end to workplace strains and sprains.

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Europe under strain



Manufacturing problems: Tools and workstations are rarely designed with workers, particularly women workers, in mind. The result can be obvious.

The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) is to make 2000 a campaigning year against workplace strains. Rory O'Neill, Hazards' editor and the author of the campaign resource book Europe under strain, explains why ETUC is launching the first ever continent-wide union safety campaign.

Work-related musculoskeletal disorders, an occupational health problem known about for thousands of years, is Europe's No. 1 workplace health complaint.

In any year over 44 million workers in the European Union - 30 per cent of the workforce - will suffer back problems caused by their jobs. A similar proportion will be affected by work-related repetitive strain disorders.

All the risk factors for debilitating occupational strains and sprains were identified as commonplace by respondents to a 1996 European Union-wide European Foundation survey.

A third (33 per cent) said their work involved manipulating heavy loads and 45 per cent had painful or tiring work positions.

More than half (57 per cent) had to perform repetitive hand and arm movements or "work at a very high rhythm" (54 per cent), with a third (32 per cent) having no influence on their work rhythms and methods. Two-thirds (67 per cent) had their pace of work dictated by demands from customers, patients, passengers or other service users.

Work was becoming more intense in all European Union countries, the survey found. According to the European Foundation this combination of repetitive work and a lack of breaks to recover was "a very serious risk factor" facing Europe's workforce.

Visual display unit (VDU) workers, using an entirely new piece of workplace equipment developed at a cost of billions, have learnt that their health and safety was not given sufficient priority in the design spec. And the super "clean" blue chip companies manufacturing the microchips - a speck of dust could damage the product - produce RSIs as efficiently as their grimier industrial factory counterparts.

All the human resourcefulness and resources that produced technology of such extraordinary power and with such an impact on our lives, was not marshalled to ensure products and ways of working were free of entirely predictable risks.

The massive increase in the number of recognised or compensated strain injury claims in the US, Australia, the UK, France and other industrialised countries reflects two factors: modern work and work methods are producing strains in ever more white collar and blue collar jobs; and unions, as part of their efforts to challenge the strain injuries epidemic, are assisting workers obtain recognition

and compensation for their strains.

The ETUC recognises that strong unions can make the difference - *Europe under strain* is packed with case histories of effective union action to tackle work strains, at international, national, industry and workplace level, in Europe and beyond (see centre pages).

Marc Sapir, director of ETUC's health and safety research arm TUTB, the organisation with practical responsibility for running the campaign, says strains have to become "part of the union bargaining agenda" and adds: "Unions are seeking Europe-wide policies that recognise workers' rights to participation and representation."

He concludes: "To promote a fairer, safer way of working, unions must work together, co-ordinate their efforts and develop new work organisation, work environments and equipment based on human needs."

Jobs and equipment designed to be safe will save employers and society as a whole enormous sums in sickness absence not taken, wages and production not lost, compensation payments not made, safety violations not prosecuted.

To prevent strains, however, requires an acknowledgement that workers are not there to provide the flexibility in the system, through contorting and stressing their bodies and brains to cope with poorly designed equipment or systems of work, or through increasing their work rate to accommodate production demands, or because the workforce is too stretched, too cowed or too insecure to complain.

The strain injury statistics suggest employers' arms will have to be twisted before this message gets through.

ETUC and its health and safety research arm TUTB have produced a "toolbox" of resources to support the strains campaign.

Europe under strain: *A report of trade union initiatives to combat workplace musculoskeletal disorders.* This 128-page book is fully illustrated and gives examples of union initiatives, campaigns, policies and strain injury assessment and management tools. This well-referenced and accessible union source book also has comprehensive resource lists.

Integrating gender in ergonomic analysis. This document is the definitive academic analysis of the effects of gender bias the recognition of strains and on strategies to combat them (see also *Hazards* 67).

TUTB Newsletter Special issue on musculoskeletal disorders and tools to analyse the work problem.

Details of the publications, the ETUC's campaign strategy and of training events and resources on musculoskeletal disorders can be found on the TUTB pages of the ETUC web site: <http://www.etuc.org/tutb/uk/projets5.html>

Events during the strain injuries campaign year include: **European Week 2000** against musculoskeletal disorders in October 2000. **International RSI Day**, 29 February 2000. Training events and national trade union centre-led initiatives across Europe. Further details from TUTB, Bd Roi Albert II, Bte 5, B-1210 Brussels, Belgium. Tel: 00 322 224 0560. Fax: 00 322 224 0561. email: tutb@etuc.org web: <http://www.etuc.org/tutb>