



15th European Work Hazards Conference, Copenhagen September 2018

What happens to the working environment in the EU?

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It is always difficult to summarize the issues of the working environment in a short time.

I will do my best and focus on some of the burning issues. However, I am aware that doing so I will neglect many other important challenges.

We have these days of interesting work to discuss together and everyone here has a lot to contribute for our common struggle.

If I compare the situation today with previous years, I would say that we are facing huge uncertainties, at national level and EU level. It would be meaningless to try to predict anything about the future of the EU after the Brexit and the next EU elections in May 2019.

More than ever, nothing is written in advance. Our own struggles, our own decisions, our own co-operation are crucial for finding a way ahead in the interest of the workers.

The most burning issue today is the structural violence against the migrants. Not only street violence, as occurred recently in Chemnitz, but also State violence such as here in Denmark where the state was allowed to confiscate the few poor goods carried by migrants. Unfortunately, Denmark is not an exception: everywhere in Europe, State structural violence against recent migrants has reached alarming levels.

We can see it everywhere.

In the Mediterranean Sea, where thousands of people are killed by the EU and national policies which try to build a wall across a sea that has been for thousands of years a free space for moving, exchanging, building together new cities, new hopes, and new civilisations.

Many of the survivors from the Mediterranean are jailed in centres; many of them are exploited as slave-workers in virtually all sectors of the economy: agriculture, hotels and restaurants, cleaning, domestic work, small enterprises, etc...

Such a level of structural violence is the worst attack on human rights and on workers' rights that has occurred since the end of the Second World War.

Such violence is possible also because different sectors of the population, apart from

native workers themselves accept, to a certain extent, the hate agenda pervaded by the ultra-right.

Racism has developed instead of internationalism; the illusion of maintaining a certain level of welfare instead of fighting together with the migrants for a better equality in society.

But, you would say that I am not speaking of the working environment and would ask me to return to that theme. I am deeply convinced that there is a very strong link between the frightening progresses of the ultra-right parties, and their capacity to influence the agenda of most of the other political parties on one side, and the deterioration of the work environment on the other side.

A recently published book in France by Thomas Coutrot, makes an analysis from the data of work environment surveys and compares them with election results. The analysis suggests that there is a strong link between ultra-right percentage of votes and the lack of workplace democracy.

Based on a territorial analysis ultra-right has its best results in constituencies where there is less worker-democracy at the workplace; where workers have less capacity for collective influence about the pace of work, work organization, and basic choices for any person with a brain.

If employers deny you control over your working life, day after day, it is probably logical to assume that when you are suddenly called to be a citizen, once every 4 years, you don't reflect too much, you don't discuss collectively with your colleagues about the best options for the working class, you can be influenced by authoritarian leaders - 'big chiefs' with demagogic proposals.

I would not like to leave you with the impression that we are just lamenting this situation without achieving any results.

From 2016, thanks to different factors through which common trade union action across Europe has played a crucial role, we have achieved some partial improvements in the EU legislation on work related cancer.

We did not reach all our objectives but something has moved in the right direction. It is a real success. It gives us confidence that even in a very difficult context, our struggles can be successful. Crystalline silica was excluded from the scope of application of the carcinogens Directive, now it is included bring a higher standard of protection for the life of more than 5 million workers. Reprotoxins are still excluded but thanks to a broad alliance between the trade unions, the majority in the European Parliament and different Member States, it could soon be included in 2019 or 2020.

It is possible to win on some issues if we build alliances, if we move all together for example from Iceland to Turkey as one block.

Our network is only a small piece of that complex movement, but this small piece is very precious. Let's spend these 3 days in fruitful discussions. That would be my main message for today.

Fighting for a good work environment is fighting against social inequality. We know that a bad work environment means millions of workers injured with the highest rates among the most exploited.

Fighting for a good work environment is fighting for workplace democracy, for workers control over their working lives.

In that perspective, fighting for a good work environment is a strategic central priority for the trade union movement. It is a challenge about making everyone feel the collective strength of the workers. It is also a challenge about improving democracy in the unions themselves. Building them from rank and file experiences.

Let's build together, brick by brick, a more active hazards movement in EU.

I wish you success not only in the discussions here in Copenhagen but in your present daily activities for workers health and safety in your own country.

I am sure that we can build on the success in the case on cancer legislation and get more on other risks like musculoskeletal disorders and psychosocial risks.

We should also pay attention to the structural asset of health and safety, fighting for safety representatives with more rights and a stronger influence, for effective and persuasive enforcement against industrial crimes, for good preventative services fully independent of the employers

Let's repeat again and again with Mother Jones, the great US working class organizer "An injury to one is an injury to all".

Laurent Vogel, ETUI

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