A new Community strategy on health and safety at work 2002-2006

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PURPOSE : to modernise EU health and safety policy and rules to cover new types of workplace risk, such as bullying and violence at work and stress-related conditions. The strategy also seeks to consolidate a culture of risk prevention at work. CONTENT : safety and health at work now constitutes one of the European Union's most concentrated and most important social policy sectors. As early as 1951, the European Coal and Steel Community set about improving the safety of workers, a concern which the Treaty of Rome extended to all employed people. As a result, a substantial corpus of legislation aimed at raising standards of safety and health has developed since the late 1970s, and especially since the Single European Act was adopted in 1987. It is because the EU can call on such an abundant source of material that it is crucial for the social policy agenda to set out a Community strategy. This strategy, which covers the period 2002-2006, has three novel features: - it adopts a global approach to well-being at work, taking account of changes in the world of work and the emergence of new risks, especially of a psycho-social nature. As such, it is geared to enhancing the quality of work, and regards a safety and healthy working environment as one of the essential components. - it is based on consolidating a culture of risk prevention, on combining a variety of political instruments - legislation, the social dialogue, progressive measures and best practices, corporate social responsibility and economic incentives - and on building partnerships between all the players on the safety and health scene. - it points up the fact that an ambitious social policy is a factor in the competitiveness equation and that, on the other side of the coin, having a "non-policy" engenders costs which weigh heavily on economies and societies. To be more specific, the objective of the Community's policy on health and safety at work must be to bring about a continuing improvement in well-being at work, a concept which is taken to include the physical, moral and social dimensions. In addition, a number of complementary objectives must be targeted jointly by all the players. 1) a continuing reduction in occupational accidents and illnesses. Thought should be given to setting quantified objectives, at both Community and Member State level, particularly in sectors of activity with above-average incidence rates, and having special regard to arrangements for implementing the European employment strategy. 2) mainstreaming the gender dimension into risk evaluation, preventive measures and compensation arrangements, so as to take account of the specific characteristics of women in terms of health and safety at work. 3) prevention of social risks. Stress, harassment at the workplace, depression and anxiety, and risks related to dependence on alcohol, drugs and medicines, should all be the subject of specific measures but should form part of a global approach in association with health care systems. 4) enhanced prevention of occupational illnesses. Priority should go to illnesses due to asbestos, hearing loss and musculo-skeletal problems. 5) taking account of demographic change in terms of risks,accidents and illnesses. Preventive measures should take more account of the age factor, and should specifically target young people and ageing workers. 6) taking account of changes in forms of employment, work organisation arrangements and working time. Workers in non-standard or precarious working relations constitute a sensitive group. 7) taking account of the size of firms. SMEs and very small businesses, as well as self-employed workers and unpaid family helpers, should all be the subject of specific measures in terms of information, awareness and risk prevention programmes. 8) analysis of new or emerging risks, with special reference to risks associated with the interaction between chemical, physical and biological agents, and those associated with the general working environment (ergonomic, psychological and social risks).