



From the workplace to design and back: the commitment of Trade Unions in the enlarged Europe

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I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak today at the 2nd European Conference on standardization, testing and certification in the field of occupational safety and health: it is a privilege to join this outstanding panel. Let me thank the organisers for the invitation, but also for their dedication and support.

We trade unions follow with much attention the Euroshnet efforts to coordinate OH&S institutions in the field of standardization: Euroshnet's vision reflects the clear message sent out by the Lisbon Strategy: the competitiveness of the EU relies not only on markets and power, but also on people and democracy, because the social dimension is an integral part of a functioning market economy. From another angle, standardization is both a technical and social matter, as production – in all its aspects – must serve human well-being.

The topics of this Conference – the connection between European directives and harmonised standards, as well as European and international standardization – have always been on the agenda of the ETUI-REHS since its creation 15 years ago. We have always considered standardization to be the privileged arena for dialogue between market and trade players, authorities, and social partners. As many of you are probably aware, for the past ten years our focus has been on the dialogue between designers and users of work equipment.

When I look back at the reflections that I had the pleasure to share with you four years ago, I remember that three main elements were under the attention of the European Trade Union Institute:

- the wish to expand our knowledge of the European standardization process in its changing context moving up to a more global setting;
- the trade union need to develop a better understanding of the role played by harmonised standards in the implementation of the machinery directive;
- finally, the intention to see what lessons standards bodies could learn from participatory approaches to equipment design based on the extensive knowledge that final users possess on the equipment they work with.

Since then, these objectives have been integrated in a three-fold research programme in partnership with the Swedish SALTSA Programme, concluded with the publication of the main outcomes.

The Standards Project provided examples of the tensions between regulations and standards when moving from CEN to ISO and back. The Machinery Project – carried out in four member states – showed that improvements are needed concerning communication between manufacturers and users of machinery. It confirmed the crucial role of manufacturers in standardization work given their intimate knowledge of their equipment. Finally, the participatory design project showed that *participatory design* – supported by appropriate research efforts – might represent a methodological vehicle to channel end-user data and make it part of the knowledge base guiding standard revision work and market surveillance initiatives.

This three-fold programme culminated in a European Conference on the safety of work equipment that took place in June 2003, where we decided to express our concerns to the highest officials of the DG Enterprise, ISO and CEN. The Conference represented a unique opportunity to discuss a number of topics.

Concerning trade unions' contribution to standardization work, three levels of participation in standardization of work equipment and work systems were debated. On a first level, *direct participation* in Technical Committees and Working Groups in order to ensure that at national level this participation is adequate. Secondly, *indirect participation through Technical and Research Institutes*: If mechanisms are in place to incorporate views from users and users' representatives, the technical and scientific work of these bodies can be effectively orientated by taking into account users' feedback, and brought into the work of the TCs in charge of drafting standards. On a third level, trade unions can be assisted by what standards themselves can say about participation of interest groups in the design and optimisation of the working place. In this respect, ISO 6385 "Ergonomic principles in the design of work systems" is going to play a key role. It is a generic standard, very close to a "guideline" addressed to all actors involved in the design of the working environment. In this guide, provisions are made on precisely how to involve users in the design of the working environment.

The revision of standards is another key element for end users' involvement: feedback data from the workplace must be integrated in the revision process. A new phase for harmonised machinery safety standards is opening with the revision of the first generation of standards adopted in support of the Machinery Directive. The five-yearly revision process provides an opportunity to improve existing standards, taking into account technical progress, the lessons learnt by the standards makers over the past ten years and, above all, experience in using machinery designed according to the existing standards.

Two other key questions are important to trade unions: accessibility (prices) and language; standards in public enquiry are not available in the national languages. This is a major barrier, not only for trade unions, but also for employers' organizations and any kind of body interested in contributing to standardization.

Another element is consensus: when national bodies come to the European level, what is the consensus they are representing? When, in a national context, is it considered that a consensus has been achieved? Do we mean the same thing when it comes to 'national consensus', its achievement, its expression? The ETUI-REHS wants a clear understanding of this topic.

Finally, ETUI-REHS supports the creation of a European database on information on work equipment, including accident statistics, exposition data, near misses, market information, etc. The revision of the New Approach should contain this dimension.

We trade unions believe that it is not enough to write down that everybody can participate in the standardization system: what social partners need is a plain field, clear procedures and appropriate safeguards for their interests. Trade unions want to give "better glasses" to the system when it comes to health and safety implications. For ten years we have worked to create and sustain a network of people interested in carrying out the debate on participation of interest groups in standardization. An essential element is represented by Pilot projects carried out to identify standards where there is room for

workers contribution and improvement, and to further stimulate the debate about participatory design as a vehicle for user feedback up to work equipment design.

The June Conference finally provided the opportunity to discuss what might happen to the European model of standardization, its dynamics and trade union involvement when moving up to the international scale. Globalization brings new challenges to the complex relation between standards and legislation. And the ETUI-REHS experience in the CEN and ISO arena so far bears out the level of that complexity. The CEN and ISO cooperation brings together a large number of technical experts from all over the world to (endeavour to) agree on common technical solutions to identified problems. This process reveals widely differing conceptions of work equipment safety, which are the product of diverse historical national approaches to health and safety regulation. Different safety philosophies have therefore emerged over the years, and crucial elements like risk perception, risk–damage causality, state of the art, human-technology interaction among others all remain sticking points where different views confront one another. In addition, the international dimension of standardization brings some new questions. Which organisation might assume the task of framing international essential requirements (i.e., identifying common regulatory objectives to align legal requirements in countries with different fundamental cultural and societal concerns), how, and using what instruments? Questions also arise about how international voluntary standards might recognize and support the essential requirements, and which international forum would monitor the interaction between them.

The chances of getting in the international sphere what has been achieved in Europe by trade unions' continuous struggle for an "ideal" standardization model that supports work equipment regulation (cooperation between industry, workers, consumers and authorities with a delicate balance of interests between all actors involved, producing a consensus that gives credibility to the results) probably remain slim.

All the elements arising from the opportunity to exchange views with the ISO, CEN and Commission Officials in June 2003 paved the way for the current research project aimed at developing a methodology (applicable to any work equipment) to accumulate knowledge on selected machines, structuring it and making it available to the engineering community (CEN, Commission, manufacturers, authorities, researchers, etc.). In particular, we would like to improve harmonised standards with knowledge and feedback from the workers using machinery at work. The results of this exercise – applied to fork-lift trucks under the scope of EN 1726 – will be published in the first half of 2006.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me conclude my contribution by informing you that the ETUI-REHS Health and Safety Department, in association with the Swedish trade union LO, has recently hosted a seminar on work equipment safety in Prague. The TUTB researched work equipment standards development and legislation for over ten years. We thought it time to take stock of the outcomes, our projects, and initiatives to be taken forward with the Workers' Group of the Luxembourg Advisory Committee on Safety and Health. Designed as a forum rather than chalk-and-talk lectures, the seminar was an opportunity for swapping information and knowledge, and above all giving a lead to framing a new strategy and a future agenda. That the meeting was held in Prague was not by chance. It was sending a message to the ten new Member States, because we know full well that taking on board the direct implications of standardisation on workers' health and safety is anything but plain sailing. All ten new members were represented, which is a result in itself.