

The pay for work in abnormal conditions will be higher than that for normal working conditions. Specific pay rates are to be laid down in collective agreements and contracts of employment.

Different forms of compensation are granted to employees working in harmful and extremely harmful conditions (based on lists of occupations). These include extra holidays, danger money for work in harmful conditions (4 to 12% of the tariff wage), and extremely harmful conditions (12 to 24% of the tariff wage), preferential pension allowance, special food supplements and free milk for employees working in extremely harmful conditions.

Abnormal working conditions are defined as at least one harmful factor in the working environment that exceeds the permissible limit values set by health and safety regulations (hygiene standards) and other occupational health and safety laws. The Labour Code provides for wage supplements to be paid for abnormal working conditions, but does not stipulate the exact amounts.

The **Czech Republic's** Salary and Average Wage Act provides that: "In the case of work in difficult and unhealthy working conditions, and night work, pay and benefits must be in accordance with the Governmental decree. Collective agreements may provide for other compensation amounts".

The Decree on minimum rates, compensation for work in difficult and unhealthy working conditions and night work, defines the conditions and stipu-

lates the amount of pay. Generally, difficult and unhealthy conditions exist if:

- Maximum chemical and dust exposure limits are exceeded
- The standards on maximum exposure per shift to vibrations, ionizing radiation, electromagnetic fields, etc., or other general hazards, are exceeded
- There is a risk of infection; contact with allergens, raised air pressure, chemical carcinogens, etc.

Difficult and unhealthy conditions are listed in an annex to the decree.

In **Bulgaria**, compensation and prevention principles for hazardous workplaces are stipulated by law. The forms of compensation for work in hazardous conditions are:

- Extra annual paid leave
- Shorter working hours
- Free (complementary) protective food and antitoxins
- An early retirement scheme
- Extra pay

In **Romania**, there are various forms of compensation for hazardous work, the main five being:

- Extra pay
- Shorter working day
- Extra holidays
- Food supplement to increase resistance
- Early retirement

Only the retirement and shorter daily work time schemes are statutory. ■

WORK-RELATED STRESS

How to make the European work-related stress agreement a practical step forward?

The new framework or autonomous agreement¹ signed on 8 October 2004 by the EU social partners reflects a compromise reached after lengthy negotiations: depending on where you stand, therefore, it has good points which could be drawbacks, and vice versa...

Whatever else, the number of complaints about stress², the big problems it creates for workers and the firms that employ them, mean that the good points outweigh the bad.

The agreement is not law, but a binding contract on its signatories and their members to use every effort to put what they have signed into practice³. Unfor-

tunately, it contains no appropriate machinery for applying penalties for a breach of its undertakings.

It contains no definition of stress, so the concept remains vague and complex! The question is, whether a definition of stress is really that vital. At some months' distance from the negotiations, and looking at the text of the agreement, it arguably has little importance in operational terms, because the main health and safety thrust of the agreement is on screening mechanisms and tackling the causal factors of work-related stress.

A big focus is put on these causal factors⁴ which play into the development of endogenous stress⁵

¹ Autonomous because entered into voluntarily by employers and unions.

² The last available study by the Dublin Foundation found that 30% of workers reported suffering from stress.

³ Although a stand-alone agreement is by definition "voluntary", that does not mean, as some might wish, that the parties are free not to apply it!

⁴ Also known as "stressors".

⁵ The agreement recognizes the existence of exogenous stressors, so imported stress, but what purchase do they offer workers and employers in terms of a preventive approach?

in the workplace: they include work organization, work environment, work content, and communication issues. This mechanistic, cause-and-effect approach to stressor-induced stress is what prevention experts are most concerned with. The so-called dynamic risk management approach to prevention is what lets prevention experts identify and more effectively eliminate stressors: that dynamic approach is central to the agreement through a clear reference to Framework Directive 89/391/EEC, of which the mechanism is a cornerstone.

Experience and daily events show how these prevention mechanisms often stop short at the diagnostic phase - "Yes, we note that a particular risk is present in the workplace" -, official report writing, and, occasionally pointing out very general ways forward for damage-limitation. Where psychosocial processes like work-related stress are concerned, the constraints (or work- or work organization-related environmental stressors) acting on individuals produce effects - strains - which vary widely between people, who will develop the symptoms of stress at differing rates. This "stress-strain" link is behind the persuasive argument that increasing individual resistance to stressors will reduce the prevalence of work-related stress. This approach is not really relevant to first-line prevention, since it is the very opposite - elimination of risk factors - that is supposed to come before anything else. But we, no more than the agreement, would want to rule out⁶ these other people-centred measures.

The agreement on work-related stress adds a dynamic intervention aspect to assessment: the second pillar on which the agreement stands is action to prevent, eliminate or reduce the effects of stressors through a range of measures - management and communication, training of managers and workers, information and consultation of workers. Such action will be dynamic in that, once in place, it will be reviewed regularly and its effects and optimum resource utilization assessed.

The right mix of assessment and intervention, with assistance from competent outside experts when needed, should in the fullness of time help to reduce the prevalence of work-related stress.

The TUTB in close cooperation with the ETUC and ETUI⁷ staged a first follow-up seminar on 7 and 8 October 2004, timed to coincide with the official signing of the agreement. The trade union health and safety experts⁸ who attended were looking to find out how to put the agreement to best use, how to make sure it got implemented, and how to measure its impacts in terms of assessment and action on work-related stressors. Inevitably, big differences were found in national practices, and the agreement will be bound to have a positive effect on these. So, some countries lack appropriate rules, while others have them on paper but they are only implemented partly, if at all, in practice, including in the countries most advanced in dynamic risk management. Cultural differences, amongst others, mean that models applied successfully in one part of Europe cannot just be imported "as is" into other countries: so, the multidisciplinary approach may be common in some countries, but in others where prevention is the exclusive preserve of doctors and engineers, the idea of enlisting work psychosociologists or ergonomists is not yet on the agenda.

Only the English version of the agreement has been co-signed by the social partners; the big need now is to translate it into all the languages used in Europe.

That will mean the regional social partners coming to arrangements over the translation and signing it in their turn: this will be a real critical path for the application of the agreement.

At the same time, the agreement needs to be promoted by any means that will get it effectively known about, incorporated into national practices, and applied in practice at every level possible (national, industry, workplace, etc.).

The TUTB and ETUI will be monitoring the processes of translating, implementing and using the framework agreement on work-related stress. Regularly updated information will be posted on the TUTB website. ■

Roland Gauthy, TUTB Researcher
rgauthy@etuc.org

More information:

- Stress at Work, *TUTB Newsletter*, Special Issue, No. 19-20, September 2002, 60 p.
- Our Internet Report:
<http://tutb.etuc.org> > Main topics > Stress at work

⁶ Individual coping techniques come at the final or tertiary level of prevention to be used... when all else has failed.

⁷ European Trade Union Institute.

⁸ From the 25 EU member countries who are members of the Luxembourg Advisory Committee and a number of experts from the accession countries.