

Closing address

European Charter on Health and Safety – updating September 2003 / Caroline Bedale



Caroline Bedale presented the proposals to a new charter



Jim Swan from Scotland thanked the Danish network for a good conference.

Caroline Bedale

Thank you for all your suggestions and comments. They will go to the Steering Committee to consider what to include in the Charter and what to prioritise. We aim to circulate this soon as a working document, so after the Conference you can also send comments.

First I want to talk briefly about why we need a Charter, then I am going to summarise the suggestions.

When the Charter was written – after the Conference in Sheffield in 1992 – one of our main concerns was about the new Directives on health and safety coming from the European Union, and how we were going to make sure that they would be implemented in each country in the European Union.

But things have changed a lot since then. Now we want to make it more realistic and practical, and relate it more to everyday working life, and to give us some ways to challenge the neo-liberal economics and attacks on trade unions and workers rights.

Some people suggested we should change the name of the Network – we will consider this – but we don't want to spend a lot of time arguing about our name. It's more useful to make sure we achieve something, whatever we are called.

We are a European network – but Europe means much more than the European Union. There are countries which have chosen to stay outside of the European Union, and there are countries from former Eastern Europe which are choosing to become part of the European Union.

The theme of the Conference is 'networking across borders'. But we want to think beyond that, because the impact of Europe goes worldwide. We want to break through borders. We didn't make the borders. We didn't make individual nations, competing and fighting against each other. As trade union activists on health and safety we support fellow workers not only in an expanding Europe but throughout the world. We don't want to reduce our risks by exporting them elsewhere in the world.

We are all particularly concerned about the rise of extreme right wing parties and their racist ideology. We have to find ways to fight racism at all levels.

The Charter is not something just for the Steering Committee, or to be presented to governments or trade union leaders. It is a working programme for all of us to use as:

- 1. A series of demands for a better working environment to keep workers healthy and safe.*
- 2. A tool – a means to discuss, to organise, to educate, to politicise.*

The Charter also needs to include strategies for how we are going to win our demands. It is a working document which can be constantly up-dated to respond to threats and attacks from companies and governments, and also to set a positive agenda of what we want and how we're going to get it.

So, now to some of the suggestions you have made:

It needs a new introduction to address the present political climate, and a new section on Unity about the dangers of racism and of 'divide and rule'.

We have tried to group the suggestions under headings or themes. Cutting across all these themes we also need to consider how each of them particularly affects women workers and workers from ethnic minorities – whether settled within any country or migrant workers, asylum seekers and refugees – and how the working environment affects their lives as a whole. And another general theme is that workers and their trade union representatives must have influence, and control, of the measures and services to ensure health and safety.

Outsourcing / privatisation / temporary and agency workers

Limitations on the rights to use sub-contractors, and Main contractors should have responsibility for pay and working conditions of sub-contractors workers (so as not to undercut or undermine other workers).

How we can use requirements to meet health and safety standards to keep out private contractors, especially from public sector.

Agencies must have a duty to provide at least the same wages and conditions for the agency workers as the workforce in the company in which they are contracted to work.

No privatisation of working environment work – occupational health services, health and safety advisers and experts.

Flexibility

Flexible working to suit the worker, not the company – shift work, split shifts, night work.

Flexibility should not be at the cost of pay, working and social conditions.

There should be limits of working hours and pressure, and more breaks. There should be limits to tele-working or home working.

Laws and Regulations

We need to try to defend any good laws and regulations, and continue to demand improvements.

We also need to strengthen enforcement of the law, with criminal prosecution and penalties for companies and managers who break health and safety laws or cause harm to workers.

We must fight against deregulation and attempts to pass the responsibility to keep healthy at work onto the individual workers – it must be the duty of employers.

Partnership between workers and employers is a possible strategy for unions to use – but it can have positive and negative aspects. It must not be used to justify deregulation – it should be more than minimum legal compliance – and is not a substitute for regulation.

We should campaign for a European Directive on stress at work.

We should lobby for the inclusion of Occupational Health and Safety conventions of the ILO into national legislation, and ensure enforcement.

There should be more education by law for management and safety representatives, paid for by the employer, with a percentage of the organisation's budget set aside for health and safety training.

Equality

We must ensure that equality issues – whether to do with ethnicity, age, gender, disability, sexuality – are part of mainstream health and safety work, not something separate.

We want differentiation not discrimination. That means recognising the differences in and between people and the impact that work has on them, and the measures we need to take to ensure they are equally protected.

Trade union organisation, Safety Representatives

Trade unions need to be stronger. All workers must have the real opportunity to join a trade union and take part in collective bargaining.

The term Safety Representatives may not be common to every country – but we mean workers who are elected by their trade union colleagues to represent them on health and safety issues. They are not appointed by companies or government.

Safety Representatives – and all workers - must have the right to speak openly about hazards and dangers at work, and to be protected from victimisation by employers for doing this.

Safety Representatives should be able to represent their members no matter who the employer is – they should have the right of access to any companies or workplaces where they have members.

There should be a right of access into workplaces for researchers, experts, advisers on behalf of workers and their trade unions.

Trade unions should have rights to international collective bargaining in multi-national companies, and to controlling and enforcing standards.

Occupational Health Services

We should try and get better standard of OHS across Europe.

Workers' demands and concerns should be added to guidelines and certifications.

We should prioritise access to OHS which prevent workers from becoming ill, and prioritise workers representation in those preventative services.

Strategies

We will need to do more work on strategies to achieve these demands – but we already have some practical ideas.

- 1. European and international collaboration to make and then to implement collective agreements – especially in some newer sectors like IT – and to set minimum standards which cannot be pushed aside by capital. This includes global works councils in multi national companies, with the right of Health and Safety union representatives to meet and exchange information.*
- 2. Sharing information and experiences – by email groups, by the internet, and by exchange visits of real people. We should try to get more international contacts.*
- 3. The EWHN should review how it applies political pressure and organises campaigning across all the networks which are involved.*
- 4. We should start to prepare for a global work hazards conference in 2005 – is anyone offering to organise this?*

These are just some ideas to rewrite the Charter. Please consider them, and tell us anything else you think we should include.

And finally - we think that we should all have the Norwegian T shirt with its slogan 'Never Give Up'.