



HEALTH AND SAFETY STRATEGY FOR FIREFIGHTERS IN THE EUROPEAN MEDITERRANEAN AREA

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“Health and Safety for Firefighters of the Mediterranean Area”

Final document

The present document consists in the minutes of the Ljubljana meeting of July 7th 2009, held for the final assessment of the project called Health and Safety for Firefighters of the Mediterranean Area. The debate focussed on the findings of the survey carried out by the expert of the project; on the guidelines produced by the Steering Committee for the benefit of firefighters' union delegates; on the topics to be identified and investigated as a follow-up to the project; as well as on the inevitable relations to establish with both the EPSU and the EU.

By then, all the participating countries had sent in their answers to the questionnaire, which had not been the case in the Madrid Workshop of May 12th and 13th 2009. The thorough investigation of answers has highlighted a few major concerns shared in by all, but also substantial differences, which will both be summarized in this final document.

The principle of absolute separation between Firefighters' and Police or Military Forces' activities was unanimously accepted and asserted, because of the conflicting nature of such activities as: rescue and law-enforcement operations; helping people and repression; cohesion and involving populations in Civil Protection activities and the secrecy of policing operations.

Likewise, the image of men and women firefighters seen as heroes was largely and strongly rejected. Yet this image is strongly supported among the public at large and cunningly kindled by firefighting managing institutions themselves.

Therefore, a sort of positive mythology was reported to be developed on purpose, in order to deny the most basic rights of health and safety to working men and women exposed at very high risks of occupational diseases caused by being regularly in contact with hazardous chemical, biological and nuclear substances unleashed by the gazes of fires or industrial accidents.

It is not by chance therefore that all the participating countries reported scant medical investigations performed: nobody seems to be compliant with current regulations prescribing annual medical check-ups for high-risk job positions.

Likewise, the same level of shortcoming was observed with regard to vocational training for a kind of work that implies highly technical skills to be able to use specialized equipment and means for effective service provision and at the same time for the protection of firefighters' health and safety.

For this reason, the Steering Committee sees in the guidelines gathered in the short handbook produced as a project output an essential tool provided to firefighters' union delegates, with a view to further developing bargaining on health and safety in the Mediterranean area.

The debate highlighted the need for a few changes to be made in the original text of the handbook. First of all, a checklist of all the risks hypothesized for every given action, as well as reports of actual occurrence should be inserted in the handbook, with a view to constantly updating the case studies on the dangers encountered. As a matter of fact, case histories are not only vast but also ever changing and difficult to anticipate.

There is such a close link between the risk associated to a hazardous job position and the incidence of accidents on the workplace, that the issue should be investigated more thoroughly. This is the reason why the Steering Committee required an amendment to the text providing for special recommendations to be given by the EU to Firefighters.

At the same time, the Steering Committee stressed all the limits of the handbook should it remain the only tool available for union delegates, also given the scant financial resources available to produce it. Thus, the action of workers' representatives might turn out to be poor and underperforming, in consideration also of the total lack of interest on firefighters' issues among the political forces leading firefighting public services.

It becomes therefore essential for the issues debated within the Project Steering Committee to be tackled with at European level, with regular exchanges within the framework of EPSU. Yet regular meetings between Firefighters and Firefighting institutions of the Mediterranean area should also be maintained. As a matter of fact, firefighters' unions should come up with medium-term goals to be achieved in all member countries, as well as with more general objectives whose achievement will be requiring an action at EU level, with an active role played by EPSU.

At European level, the debate over the worth of the public service as a gage of equity for the entire population - regardless of the social class people belong to - will of course be unavoidable.

Against this general backdrop, therefore, the firefighting service cannot be that different from other public service sectors that are likewise instrumental to maintaining welfare levels. Alongside with rescue, these include other indispensable common goods like water, healthcare, education, and transportation.

From this viewpoint, another commonly shared concern for both the Mediterranean and Europe is working time, just like health and safety at work.

The issue of working time is very often affected by measures taken by the EU itself, with attempts at even breaking the 48 weekly hour ceiling in healthcare and firefighting. This of course leads one to think about the nature and scope of attacks against public work.

In the firefighting service, for instance, a close link has been highlighted over the whole length of the project between professional and volunteer firefighters. If this is analysed in the light of a similar trend that is becoming widespread in healthcare, it points to the worsening of public services in the future, when ever more scant resources are going to be spent and in a wrong manner, and at the same time working and pay conditions of men and women workers will be worsening.

Indeed, with no intention to overlook the history and traditions of firefighting in each member country, there is a need to analyse the organisational patterns, financial resources, staff members and the means utilised by each. Even the more so if a European directive is envisaged on the standardisation of rescue and civil protection operations, because the actions of professional and volunteer firefighters should in this case be made as uniform as possible.

Such a widespread policy of integration of the professional and volunteer components could not but involve the whole range of Rescue and Civil Protection operations. Even the more so if we consider that Civil Protection is often seen only as a container to be filled in as a function of political usefulness and not because of the real needs of the service which sees considerable cutbacks in its resources.

This might be the object of the follow-up to the current project involving the Mediterranean area, and focussing on catastrophes owing to common morphological and geological features, as even more strongly highlighted by the 2007 devastating forest fires, and the 2009 dramatic events, first and foremost the earthquake that has razed the town of L'Aquila to the ground, and, more recently, by the forest fires of last July and August in Spain and Greece.

In conclusion, the project has produced most fruitful results in terms of fostering the exchange of information and improving the level of training among union delegates. This will play a decisive role in promoting bargaining namely on the issue of health and safety at work.

The project has produced tangible output: i.e. the guidelines-containing handbook, the ad-hoc website <http://www.hssfmed.eu>, on which the project documentation will be published, and which will be used also in the future for the exchange of information and training among partners. Mostly important, in the EPSU Firefighters' Network meeting of next September 23rd the project will be one of the agenda items. This is yet another proof that in order to be appropriately protected, the public service should be the object of regular and fruitful relations among unions, regardless of the place and area of service provision.

August 2009

PARTNERS

1. SSSH UATUC (Union of Autonomous Trade Unions) Croatia
2. FSAP CC.OO. (Comisiones Obreras) Spain
3. FP CGIL, Italy
4. ADEDY Panhellenic Fed. of employees Unions of fire-fighting dept. Greece
5. GWU (General Workers Union) Malta
6. SPGS (Sindikat Poklicnega Gasilstva Slovenije) Slovenia
7. STAL Sindicato Nacional dos Trabalhadores da Administração Local, Portugal
8. EPSU European Public Services Union - Belgium