

## **Trade unions as agents of environmental awareness : outcomes from the RISE project**

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From November 1996 to October 1999, the two main Belgian trade unions – CSC and FGTB – were involved in a project entitled RISE: inter-trade union network for awareness of environment (in French: “Réseau Intersyndical de Sensibilisation à l’Environnement”), supported by the Government of the Walloon Region (2). This 3-years project was designed as a pilot project and a new “RISE-2” is currently being prepared for three years more (2000-2003), as a follow-up of the positive evaluation that has been made of the first phase.

The Fondation Travail-Université (FTU) was involved in the project as a scientific partner supporting the action of the trade unions. This paper develops a description and analysis of the realisations of RISE, written from this particular angle of view, i.e. by a research institution co-operating with workers organisations. Conclusions are drawn on two main points: the relationships between trade unions and “scientific experts” on the one hand, and on the other hand to the place, scope and degree of priority given by trade unions to environmental issues. But first of all, it is useful to describe the context of RISE and its main realisations.

### ***The context of the RISE project***

It is worthwhile to mention that RISE only concerns the Walloon Region of Belgium, which is the Southern part of the country, characterised as an old-industrialised region confronted with social and economic problems linked with industrial decline and conversion. The contrasts among Walloon sub-regions is however very strong: some of them are getting increasing economic and social welfare, while some other are remaining in critical situations with very high unemployment rate (more than 25%). The two other Belgian regions (Flanders and Brussels) were not concerned as such by RISE, although many trade union people from Brussels were involved in the practical implementation of the project, as far as they are French-speaking too. Manufacturing industry remains important at the regional level, but the Walloon economy is mainly

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  - (2) RISE is supported and granted by the Minister for Environment of the Walloon Region and supervised by the Regional Administration for Environment and Natural Resources. The partners of the project are FEC (Formation Education Culture) on behalf of the trade union CSC and IWETF (Institut Wallon d’Etude, Recherche et Formation) on behalf of FGTB.

driven by services. Service employment represents 74 % of total employment (among which 29 % in market services and 45 % in public and non-profit services), energy and manufacturing 15 % and building industry 9 %. Trade unions are rooted in traditional industry, but however well represented and very dynamic in some service sectors: mass retailing, financial services, health services, community services.

There is long-standing interest of trade unions in taking into account health, safety and environment issues, even if this is not their highest priority. Since 1993, the legislation on Health and Safety Committees at the enterprise level provides workers' representatives with an access right to environmental information and an advisory role in environmental matters linked with health and safety issues. These environmental aspects are enhanced in the new legislation on prevention, health and safety, applicable since 1997. Nevertheless, the sensitivity to environment is very variable from a branch union to another, as shown in these two brief contradictory examples:

- In 1993, both branch unions of chemical industry (CSC and FGTB) were amongst the strongest opponents to a project law of environmental taxes on plastic bottles and other plastic wastes, by fear of job losses in the PVC industry. The top management of both national trade unions, as well as other sectoral unions, was however favourable to an eco-tax system, but he was challenged by the action of the chemical workers – and the eco-tax project failed. Trade unions were perceived as opponents to an ecological tax reform.
- In 1995, the CSC-union of white collar workers (CNE) received the yearly award of the environmental associations (“green palm”), as an acknowledgement for its initiatives and actions in the area of prevention and protection of the environment.

Employers are also displaying some interest for environmental initiatives. Since 1994, the Walloon federation of employers runs an eco-advising service for its members, taking advantage of a subvention from the Regional Ministry for Environment. Arguing this, the Walloon trade unions started a negotiation that aimed at getting a similar funding for an eco-advising support for workers organisations – which resulted in RISE.

The delay between insemination and birth of the trade union project was however much longer than nine months and RISE only came up at the end of 1996. RISE was designed as a pilot experiment, which has to develop and validate activities in four areas:

- information and awareness of workers,
- training of union representatives,
- pilot experiments of workers' participation in environmental change at the enterprise level,
- and “technical support” (eco-advising) for answering environmental questions raised from grass-root union initiatives.

There was a common programme for both trade unions, but each of them was quite autonomous in the implementation of the programme. The overall purpose of RISE was to increase the efficiency of existing social dialogue on environmental matters in the enterprises of the Region and to develop new initiatives of such a social dialogue.

A critical question for the trade unions was the selection of the project operators, who must have a regional dimension. For obvious linguistic reasons, union training institutes are organised on a regional basis, and therefore they were officially entrusted to carry out the RISE project. The Walloon CSC had already some experience in this area, for it has organised in 1992-93 a high-level training course on work and environment, for a group of about 20 union officers. This group of “ecologically aware officers” will play an important part in the implementation of the RISE activities within CSC.

The project structure of RISE is somewhat complex, because it reflects the difficulty of concurrent trade unions to get an agreement on a common initiative and to reach a compromise between competition and co-operation between themselves:

- FGTB decides to entrust the full operation of RISE activities to its regional training institute IWERF, but with a direct political control from the upper structure of the trade union.
- CSC also entrusted the responsibility of the implementation to its institute FEC, but FEC decides to subcontract the scientific aspects of the project to the Foundation “Travail-Université” (FTU), in order to involve a research partner in the project. Political insight was given to a CSC “environment task group”, made of representatives of branch unions and territorial unions, rather than to the upper management of the union.
- The contract with the Regional Government organised a six-monthly “steering committee”, under the responsibility of the Administration of Environment, to which trade unions were accountable.
- Co-ordination among partners was made in planning meetings between both trade union institutes FEC and IWERF. These meetings were the less formalised, but the most influent on the practical implementation of the project.

### ***The activities carried out by RISE***

#### **Information**

The main realisation in this area is the design and publication of a practical handbook for workers, entitled “Environment and enterprise” [Porot V., 1998]. The task was carried out at FTU. The handbook directly addresses workers and their union representatives and it is written and presented as didactic as possible. It is structured in three sections, which reflect the triple purpose of the publication:

- To inform: about global environmental changes, about the political context and the main features of the regulatory framework in Europe and Belgium, and about the best tools for environmental management and auditing.
- To motivate: explaining the advantages, constraints and motivations for a better environmental action at the enterprise level; dealing with the relations between environment and employment and the “double dividend” options; developing the link between environment protection, health and safety prevention and quality policies; promoting clean technology and clean product policies.

- To act: this section of the handbook directly addresses trade union representatives in workers' councils and committees for prevention and protection. It consists of 14 "practical files" of 1-2 pages each, concerning environmental problems and areas of intervention at the enterprise level: water, energy, raw material, waste water, air, waste material, noise and vibrations, soils, products and processes, logistics and transport, risk assessment, impact studies, financial aspects and general environmental strategy of the firm. Each practical file contains a list of data or information to be gathered by trade unions, how to obtain it, with which regulatory references, and some suggestions to handle and analyse the collected data.

The design of the handbook was made in close co-operation between the researchers at FTU and a "reference group" of trade union officers and delegates, acting both as a steering group and a test panel.

The handbook was printed in 7000 copies and widespread not only within unions, but also in other institutions, such as environmental agencies, research centres, high schools, vocational training institutes, and to a European audience through some Adapt or Leonardo partnerships in which FEC or IWERF were involved. A shorter version was also translated into German for the German-speaking minority of Wallonia. One of the planned exploitations of the handbook was of course to use it as a reference material in union training activities.

Some by-products are also derived from the RISE handbook. A "co-operative game" was designed by FTU and FEC in order to allow another kind of access to the content of the handbook. A part of the handbook will be downloadable from the RISE web site (3).

### **Training of workers' representatives**

Each trade union was responsible for training its own affiliates and delegates and the programmes implemented by FEC and IWERF were rather different.

IWERF has taken advantage of RISE to organise new training initiatives at the inter-professional level, whilst most of the FGTB training sessions are organised at the branch union level. These new activities mainly addressed shop-floor delegates and shop stewards and included four types of actions: a basic training cycle in environment, a specialisation training cycle, thematic one-day sessions on particular environmental problems, and awareness interventions on environment in other more general training sessions. Other training activities were designed for higher level union officers, dealing with matters of environmental policies.

FEC has build up new activities on the basis of the existing experience of its cell of "eco-advising union officers", trained in 1992-93. The main directions developed through RISE were: training of trainers at the local union level, and training to the development of actions at the local scale, together with other social groups; training sessions at the sectoral level, in industry and services; training sessions on thematic cross-sectoral matters; and training on global sustainable development issues. FEC also

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(3) URL of the RISE web site: <http://www.rise.be>

organised a public conference on “Environment, employment and technological options” in Liège (1997).

Both unions also improved their active participation in European training sessions on work and environment, organised through institutions of the ETUC (AFETT, ETUCO).

Moreover, it is worthwhile to mention that a common CSC/FGTB training session was organised in 1999 for the trade union delegates involved in the pilot experiments at the enterprise level (see below). It may be considered as an exceptional event in the trade union life in the Region, because such common initiatives do not exist: CSC and FGTB delegates only meet each other in European training sessions of the ETUC.

### **Pilot experiments at the enterprise level**

The purpose of the pilot experiments was to develop concrete experiments of social dialogue in the realisation of environmental projects at the enterprise level. Six experimental “case studies” were carried out:

- A chemical plant, manufacturing fertilisers and other agro-chemical products (278 workers), where the experiment consisted of selective separation of non-chemical waste (office, laboratory and packaging waste) on the one hand, and a diminution of nitrate emissions in waste water on the other hand.
- A food plant, manufacturing sausages and pâté (169 workers), where the action was oriented to awareness and changes of behaviour in selective separation of production waste and recycling of packaging material.
- A copper foundry, manufacturing intermediate products of copper plates and wires (179 workers), where a survey of environmental problems and a risk map were realised through the direct involvement of the workers.
- A maintenance plant for electric and diesel locomotives, belonging to the public national railway operator (SNCB) (950 workers), where an integrated plan of environmental improvements was designed and implemented: waste water processing, selective separation of waste, better identification of hazardous products, new prevention plan including environmental risks, setting up an “environmental cell” at the plant level.
- An automotive assembling plant, which “customises” imported cars for the Belgian market (137 workers), where the experiment consisted of looking for new solutions to a series of environmental or health and safety problems, for which the existing solutions were unsatisfactory for the workers: air pollution, bad operation of filters, wrong use of thinners, risks due to irrelevant building arrangements.
- A firm specialised in asbestos removal in polluted buildings (47 workers), where RISE allowed for a negotiated initiative of workers training on environment and health aspects related to asbestos.

The good final results of the six experiments may not let forget that their implementation was really difficult. The first difficulty arose at the very beginning, at

the stage of the selection of the firms. The selection was made by the trade unions, but it was not based on existing or future environmental projects. The firms were selected according to complex criteria of sectoral diversity and interest balance which belonged to the “internal kitchen” of the unions. At the beginning there was no guarantee that the cases could be really relevant from the environmental point of view, but the FEC and IWERF project managers succeeded in convincing the union teams in each firm.

A second difficulty was to move from general workers’ awareness of environmental problems in their firm, to the design and implementation of a targeted initiative. In some firms, the discussions among workers and with the plant management were very long, and few time was left for practical implementation before the deadline of the project.

A third difficulty is linked to economic restructuring that occurred in some firms during the RISE experiment. In these circumstances, ecological concerns are not staying anymore at the foreground. Fortunately, there was no case of acute and conflictive restructuring, that should have hindered the continuation of the experiment.

The evaluation made by both trade unions shows that the pilot experiments resulted in a considerable improvement of the quality of the social dialogue on health & safety issues, quality policy and environmental policy at the firm level.

### **Scientific and technical support**

The purpose of the scientific and technical support was to provide workers with targeted, relevant and updated information about urgent environmental problems to which they were confronted – a kind of “help desk”. FEC and IWERF have chosen very different ways to implement this purpose within their respective trade unions.

IWERF created an internal “technical support cell”, composed by officers of the institute and selected shop stewards. This cell answered to various documentation requests and took part in various FGTB working group. Its scope and role were mainly internal, but contributed to an improvement of ecological awareness within the union. During the last year of the project, IWERF started to publish a “press review” on work and environment and to build up a web site, that must become the Internet gate of RISE.

FEC decided to sub-contract the scientific support tasks to FTU, in order to enhance the co-operation between research and trade unions, in which FTU was obviously interested, and to give an external visibility to this co-operation. Three kind of services were proposed by FTU:

- In order to implement a “help desk” system for trade union people, an information leaflet was distributed, including a “question form” that has to be filled in and sent by fax or mail to FTU. We did not want to run any “call centre” on work and environment, and we insisted on the need of a good preparation of the questions or problems to be submitted to us by trade union delegates. They must use a formalised procedure, in such a way that their problem or request should be written down and formulated in an argued way. The experience showed that few requests were addressed from individual initiatives, and that most of the requests came from union working groups and from training sessions.

- In order to provide a structured answer to the questions raised by union delegates, FTU started a series of “thematic notes”, gathering relevant information and analysis about recurrent topics. The first one was published in 1999 about the use of solvents [Porot V., 1999]. Further thematic notes will be published by FTU in RISE-2: one about cleaning activities and one about the analysis of yearly environmental reports published by enterprises.
- FTU also proposed to the unions to start the publication of a newsletter “Work & Environment”, that should aim at a general awareness of social and ecological matters, without being considered as a trade union bulletin. Three issues of the newsletter were published in 1999 and widespread among trade unions and other institutions (academics, public authorities and agencies, environmental groups). As editor of the newsletter, FTU had to concert with its trade union partners, but was entirely responsible for the content of the publication. This principle was not easy to accept by some trade unions, that are used to exert a control on all the publications they distribute to their members. But the newsletter was positively acknowledged by its target public, within and outside trade unions. Its continuation is of course linked to the renewal of RISE-2 (4).

### ***Co-operation between research and trade unions in the area of environment***

Our own experience of involvement as a research institution in the RISE activities is quite positive, but there are some interesting points to discuss.

The first point concerns the relationship between research and “social demands” from trade unions in the area of work and environment. The help desk service was confronted with three kinds of requests:

- A lot of questions were related to the access to relevant information on environmental regulation, product toxicity or health & safety standards, which are in fact available from many other sources, including Internet sites. The answer is the job of a documentalist, not of a researcher. But the amount of questions was rather small, far below the threshold that should have justified to engage a documentation professional to provide this kind of service.
- Some other questions raised by trade union delegates were linked to particular organisational contexts in specific firms. It was impossible to answer them “from the desk”, without any on-site investigation. But it was not possible to do it with the limited financial and human means of the RISE project. Anyway the role of the researcher should not have been to bring a technical answer, but to help to develop a collective response within the firm. Doesn’t this role belong to the trade unions themselves ?
- A third category of questions were more recurrent and led to the need of a “consolidated” approach. The publication of “thematic notes”, that was not initially planned in RISE, is an indirect way to answer these recurrent questions. This is a

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(4) Past issues are available on <http://www.ftu-namur.org>, and soon on <http://www.rise.be>

research task, that includes an analysis of the background and scope of the questions and the design of an integrated answer, taking into account technical and social aspects.

Our experience in RISE confirms some of our previous research results from a European research project of the VALUE programme, about the interfaces between science and social groups in the areas of work and environment [Valenduc & Vendramin, 1996]. We pointed out that there is an over-estimation of the role of the “latent social demand” to be answered by “socially engaged scientists” – the myth of the science shop during the eighties. A lot of organisations which were created as interfaces between research and social demands were redesigned as “advisory and research centres”. The logic of the demand is replaced by the logic of service provision. This is exactly what happened with the scientific and technical support in RISE. What FTU can offer is not really a help desk answering questions, but scientific services and expertise matching specific areas of workers’ interests.

The second point concerns the own expertise of trade union delegates and its articulation with external expertise, for instance in the implementation of pilot experiments at the firm level. At the beginning of the project, it was thought that shop-floor delegates needed assistance and expertise from eco-advisers and other technical experts in the area of eco-auditing. The analysis of the pilot experiments shows however that many workers had a good basic knowledge of the environmental situation of their firm and that they could be trained in using themselves some basic tools of eco-auditing. The external expertise that they needed did not consist so much in environmental assistance, but rather in organisational skills: how to manage a project, how to communicate with company executives, technical experts and the other workers, how to set up new procedures, how to ensure a follow-up of the actions, etc.

### ***Which place for environmental issues in trade union activities ?***

Paradoxically, the main challenge of RISE was not to deal with environmental questions as such, but to do it in the framework of a common project managed by two concurrent trade unions and supported by the regional authorities, which also wanted to keep some insight in the project. Institutional power relations were very important. As an external research institution, and despite our long-standing experience of co-operation with trade unions, we consider that these power relations have raised many obstacles and hindered the optimal development of the RISE activities. The weight of the institutional constraints was heavier than foreseen, but the project managers at FEC and IWERF (5) were very dynamic and co-operative and they succeeded in overcoming most of the obstacles.

The case of RISE reveals two different union strategies towards environment:

- Environment as a tool: environmental actions are used as a supplementary tool in order to improve the main action areas of the trade union, either at the firm level (negotiation capacity, working conditions, etc.) or at the regional level (union

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(5) The success of RISE must be greatly acknowledged to both project managers Myriam Gérard (FEC) and Julie Rigo (IWERF).



representation in consultative bodies, union influence on regional policies). Environment becomes a new dimension in existing social relations.

- Environment as a goal: environment is a new strategic priority for the trade union, that requires new investments in union training (for officers and workers), environmental task forces, new relationships with other social groups (for instance green organisations and citizens associations), etc. The trade union must be an active stakeholder in the policies for environment and sustainable development.

Although both strategies are present at different levels in both trade unions, the second one (environment as a goal) appears to be dominant in CSC while the first one (environment as a tool) is dominant in FGTB, at least in the Walloon Region – may be the characteristics are just reversed in the Flemish Region.

Moreover, we share a large part of the conclusions drawn by Le Blansch and Lorentzen in their analysis of 43 company case studies of workers' participation in environmental protection [Le Blansch and Lorentzen, 1996]:

- RISE shows a wide variety of workers' initiatives, but, as mentioned in the cited article, "the next and far more difficult question arises, whether we are really talking about roles which contribute substantially to a greening of industry".
- A trade union action based on interest representation and delegation can lead to concrete proposals of improvement, in the areas of health and safety, working conditions, or quality of life. But in many cases they have a limited impact on the long-term environmental strategy of their company. The room left for a wider workers' participation in environmental change and sustainable development mainly depends on the company strategy in human resource management.

Anyway, the coexistence of multiple strategies, as well among unions as among companies, may not be an obstacle to the continuation and improvement of the new trade union practices developed during the first phase of RISE.

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