

France: Sparks fly around electrical hazards standard

Over the past four years, a group of trade unionists has been involved in developing a standard on protection against electrical hazards. One of them tells his story.

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EU Directives set general requirements for work equipment safety. The tricky challenge for standards is to turn the "spirit of the law" into technical specifications.

Image: © ImageGlobe



1. The UTE represents France in the international electrical standardization bodies. It is a member of the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) and the European Committee for Electrotechnical Standardization (CENELEC).

"If our group of trade unionists hadn't been involved in developing a standard on electrical hazards, health and safety at work would definitely have counted for less in the final version. That said, the new one still leaves a lot to be desired", says Alain Delaunay, of the CGT's (General Confederation of Labour) Power and Mineworkers' Federation. The standard is NFC C 18-510 containing detailed preventive measures to ensure the safety of persons performing work in an electrical environment. It was approved on 21 December 2011 after four years in the pipeline. Work on it began in July 2007 with a Ministry of Labour review of the 1988 regulation on the protection of workers in premises making use of electric currents, which needed updating.

"Technological developments in the area meant that risk perception had changed", says the Labour Ministry's head of standardization Laure Ginesty. In tandem with revising the regulations, the Ministry also wanted to update the digest of general safety instructions — a policy document, there being no standard as such at that time — to which the regulation refers. At a meeting of the social partners on the national occupational hazards prevention board (now the working conditions policy board) on the draft regulations, the CGT asked to have a say in the standard being developed by a committee of the Electrical Engineering Union (UTE)¹, a voluntary electrical standards body tasked with bringing provisions more into line with standard requirements.

An employee of the EDF (Electricité de France) group, Alain Delaunay is an electrician with years of live work experience. He

was seconded to the CGT in 2003 and mandated by it to sit on various bodies dealing with workplace risk prevention and safety. He brings a keen interest in preventive safety to the UTE Committee's work. But he is no Lone Ranger — he has rallied the other CGT industry federations to set up a group of a dozen or so trade unionists from a range of industries (construction, chemicals, motor manufacturing, transport, etc.).

Underdressed electricians

The other participants were not expecting to be joined by a trade union delegation. Most were engineers or experts in regulatory standards mandated by big companies (Electricité de France, France Telecom, Paris transport authority, etc.), the Labour Department, National Institute for Research and Safety (INRS) and representatives of various professional bodies in the electrical and HVAC industries.

"I realized at the first meeting that we would learn and get a lot out of this, but that we also had a lot to offer. As a committee of

"Us being there shook things up."

engineers and experts, it's first-class on the technical aspects of standardization. But their prevention approach is driven by pure economics. That means they think more in terms of managing risks than trying to eliminate them. We, goes on Alain Delaunay, brought a different perspective. Our work experience lets us bring in the reality of work and the dangerous situations that workers can be exposed to. What we have to say about eliminating risks comes from our knowledge of work accidents and analysis of actual situations. So we have managed to refocus the discussions and debates on the real issues of safety and prevention. In that respect, us being there has shaken things up".

When the issue of personal protective equipment came up for discussion, for example, the union thought it should include workwear. "You often see electricians in just T-shirts", says Alain Delaunay. "But to be properly protected against electrical hazards, your arms have to be covered up. That's why we said that coveralls should be included in the standard". Discussions go down to the smallest details. Revision of these legal standards is time-consuming and patience-testing.

"Resourcing unions to take part in standardization is basically a matter of social democracy."

"Everybody works on rewriting them sentence by sentence, sometimes discussing each individual word", says the union rep who has often doubted the real commitment of some participants to get a new standard on the books. "Having reached agreement on a form of words, we have had a member of the group backtrack and demand a new change".

The vagaries of marrying conflicting opinions into a single draft have not been the only problem. Over four years of meeting several times a month, plus preparatory meetings, the trade unionists group has lost half its members. After just several weeks, only four militants were left, two of them retired. The Ministry of Labour paid some of the costs, making it easier for the workers' reps to take part, but that isn't enough to keep the motivation going. "When we started in 2007, we never thought it would be such a long drawn-out, demanding job. People arranged to come in their official time off for union duties, but that was soon used up", says Alain Delaunay. "The time problem needs sorting out as a priority by paying the wages of the person seconded to take part in the work. Resourcing unions to take part in standardization is basically a matter of social democracy".

1800 comments filed

The other big problem is the consensus requirement that standards bodies have to operate by. The Committee of experts and trade unionists has reached agreements but a number of substantive objections remain. "We identified ten sticking points", says Alain Delaunay. "One particular stumbling block was live working. Because a moment's inattention can be fatal, the unions wanted to include a requirement for a person doing live work to be supervised by another. The industry representatives refused. So the matter was finally left to be dealt with in the technical datasheets that the work premises have to draw up".

"So, the issue was sidelined for a while, but the basic problem hasn't gone away", argues Alain Delaunay. Pressed by the Labour Ministry which needed the new standard in

order to publish the new regulations on the protection of workers in electrical environments, the participants managed to produce a standard. "But it isn't perfect", says the CGT member. "Granted, it is substantially better than the initial version, but we have serious reservations that led us to vote against the text when it was laid before the working conditions policy board²". The other stakeholders also voiced misgivings.

The public consultation on the AFNOR³ website prior to publication attracted a high level of objections: 1800 criticisms were filed. Two-thirds of them have yet to be examined. Since November 2012, the Committee has continued its work in the Electrical Engineering Union to address outstanding issues and those raised in the public consultation. Alain Delaunay and his trade union colleagues continue to attend diligently. But the trade unionist sounds a sceptical note.

"Looking at the experience we have had, we've every right to wonder whether a veneer of consensus has to be the only basis for working on. That has to make us wonder about the real possibility of finishing it off in the months ahead. Won't the consensus requirement ultimately be at odds with health and safety at work? Not everything to do with work organization can be dealt with through standardization. An official body has to step in to regulate and arbitrate. Without that, we'll keep coming up against the same problems". ●

Edging towards safer band saws

They are the bane of meat processing industry workers' lives: band saws, very frequently used for cutting meat, are lethal pieces of machinery. A moment's inattention, the slightest slip and the blade can shear one or more fingers off. It's a very real risk in Brittany which in less than 40 years has become France's foremost food industry region and Europe's breadbasket. Figures from the Regional Health Insurance Fund report that between 2001 and 2007 band saws were the cause of 175 work accidents and 8,464 sick days. In the agricultural insurance scheme, 23 accidents were reported over the same period, five of them serious. Saw manufacturers offer little by way of protection solutions, so there is often little employers can do about it.

"The EN 12 268 'Food processing machinery - Band saw machines' standard was outdated and left behind by developments in machinery", explains the Labour Ministry's head of standardization Laure Ginesty. "In the woodworking industry where these machines are also used, they meet higher safety standards. So we wanted to carry the woodworking industry's safety requirements over into the food industry taking into account the industry's specific hygiene rules", says the standardization expert. In 2006, a working group was set up of French band saw manufacturers, the Ministry of Labour, the National Institute of Research and Safety, and the secretariat of the mechanical engineering standardization office UNM. At the same time, France initiated a European-level review of standard EN 12 268. "After more than three years of work that took a lot of energy and resolve, the new legal requirements should be out in 2013", says Laure Ginesty. One improvement is that saw blades will in future have to be made inaccessible by equipping saws with a drop-down hood that remains in contact with the table.

2. A consultative body of workers' and employers' representatives operating under the aegis of the Ministry of Labour.

3. French standards body.