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LUXEMBOURG

RELEASE:

15 februari 1962

JK
AD

PORTE-PAROLE

3/62

INFORMATION BACKGROUND

PORTE-PAROLE:
POSTE 5-384

PRESSE et PUBLIC RELATIONS:
POSTE 5-468

INFORMATION RAPIDE
POSTE 5-558

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SAFETY IN COALMINES

The Mines Safety Commission and the Work of the High Authority

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I. The Mines Safety Commission

1. Origins

On September 6, 1956, shortly after the disaster at Marcinelle in Belgium, in which 262 lives were lost, the Special Council of Ministers decided, upon the proposal of the High Authority of the European Coal and Steel Community, to convene on September 25 a Conference on Safety in Coalmines to be attended by representatives of the competent authorities and of the workers' and employers' associations in the different member countries.

At its second session from February 4 to 7, 1957, the Conference debated and finalized concrete proposals, prepared by four committees, for improvements in the laws, regulations and practice relating to safety in mines. The Conference further stated its views as to the setting-up and terms of reference of a permanent Mines Safety Commission. On the basis of the final report, which was handed to it on March 5, 1957, the High Authority submitted to the Council of Ministers its own proposals for the implementation of the Conference's recommendations.

On May 9, 1957, the Council decided that a permanent Commission should be set up to follow developments with regard to safety in coalmines, and to ascertain what was being done in each country to put into effect the recommendations of the Conference and such proposals as the Council might itself find it necessary to advance.

2. Terms of reference

On July 9, 1957, the Council of Ministers defined the Commission's terms of reference as follows 1)

- "(a) The Mines Safety Commission shall follow developments in connection with safety in coalmines, including those concerning the safety regulations adopted by the public authorities, and shall assemble all necessary information on the practical results achieved, more especially in the matter of accident prevention.
- "(b) The Commission shall see to it that all relevant information which it has assembled is passed promptly to the employers' and workers' organizations.
- "(c) The Commission shall ascertain what action is being taken to put into effect the Conference's and its own proposals for improving safety.
- "(d) The Commission shall propose appropriate study and research projects, and shall indicate how it considers these can best be carried out.

(1) Cf. Journal Officiel of the European Coal and Steel Community, August 31, 1957.

- "(e) The Commission shall promote exchanges of information and experience among persons having responsibility in safety matters (e.g. by organizing seminars, instituting documentation services, etc.).
- "(f) The Commission shall propose appropriate action to ensure the necessary liaison among the rescue services of the E.C.S.C. countries.
- "(g) The Commission shall report annually to the High Authority and the Governments on its activities and on safety developments, appending accident statistics."

3. Membership and operation of the Commission

The Commission is under the chairmanship of a Member of the High Authority, and consists of 24 members appointed by the Governments (four for each Community country, of whom two represent the competent Government authorities, one the employers and one the workers). Representatives of the International Labour Organization are invited to attend its proceedings in a consultative capacity, and United Kingdom delegates may attend as observers. The Secretariat to the Commission is provided by the High Authority.

A Restricted Committee of Government representatives is responsible for maintaining liaison among the Government authorities concerned and between them and the Commission for the purpose of exchanging information and preparing the studies and deliberations.

Working Parties of experts deal with special individual problems. These fall into two groups :

(a) technical problems

Working Party on Electricity, with sub-committees on testing of flameproof electric cables, on high-tension circuitbreakers, and on protection of underground networks,

Working Party on Fires and Underground Combustion, with a sub-committee on shaft spraying and an expert committee on non-inflammable lubricants,

Working Party on Co-ordination of Rescue Organizations,

Working Party on Winding Ropes and Shaft Guides, with a sub-committee on electro-magnetic testing of ropes,

Working Party on Mechanization and Locomotives.

(b) human problems

Working Party on Medical Problems of Safety Policy,

Working Party on Psychological and Sociological Factors affecting Safety,

Working Party on the Incidence of Working Hours on Safety, with special reference to hours worked in difficult and/or unhealthy conditions,

Working Party on the Incidence of Methods of Payment on Safety.

The Commission arranged the appointment of a special panel of judges for a competition organized by the High Authority for the improvement of safety equipment in the mines.

A Working Party on Accident Statistics has worked out a pan-Community system of classifying underground accidents according to cause and to degree of seriousness.

4. Recommendations and achievements of the Commission

At its first meeting, on September 26, 1957, the Commission referred the following subjects for study :

- (a) co-ordination of rescue organizations;
- (b) accident statistics;
- (c) reporting of accidents and incidents;
- (d) action taken to implement the Conference's resolutions, and procedure to ensure that the Commission is kept regularly informed of the action so taken in the different countries;
- (e) incidence of payment on safety.

With regard to rescue operations, a Working Party of heads of central rescue stations was set up with the two tasks of

- (a) taking practical steps to ensure as prompt and effective co-operation as possible among the rescue organizations of the different countries with the means at present available;
- (b) promoting the improvement and co-ordination of the methods and equipment used, by means of contacts among those in charge at rescue stations, of studies and of tours of inspection.

An inventory was drawn up of the resources, in men and equipment, available in each coalfield, in order that each central rescue station should have a picture of what assistance it might expect from its neighbours. Tours were organized of various rescue stations both in the Community countries and in Great Britain.

In its first report, in April 1958, the Commission listed the problems specially investigated by its Working Parties, which included the perfecting of incombustible fluids to replace combustible oils for mechanical uses below ground, the equipment of shafts with a view to the prevention of fires, the use of incombustible materials in the manufacture of electric cables, the neutralization of exhaust gases from diesel locomotives, the testing of winding ropes, criteria for official approval of fire extinguishers, and so on. Among the subjects

mentioned as still under study were the human, psychological and social factors affecting safety, and the colliery medical services.

The Commission also worked to establish a picture of the action taken in the Community countries to implement the recommendations of the Conference. It studied a number of accident reports, and discussed the circumstances and causes of the accidents in question. Various recommendations, directives, opinions and reports were adopted by the Commission and forwarded to the authorities concerned. Of its recommendations, mention may be made of those relating to the risk of electric shock and for burns from underground networks; shotfiring cables; spraying as a method of dealing with shaft fires; stone-dust barriers; incombustible oils and lubricants; co-ordination of rescue organizations; and medical examination of workmen.

In its second report, in June 1961, the Commission noted with satisfaction the progress made in implementing the Conference's recommendations, whether by incorporation into national legislation and regulations or simply by adoption in practice. In its statistical section the report recorded that the incidence of injuries entailing absence from duty below ground for eight weeks or over had dropped from 13.551 per million underground man-hours in 1958 to 12.954 per million in 1959, and the incidence of fatalities from 0.610 to 0.590.

At its meeting on December 12, 1961, the Commission adopted reports on the use of recording accelerometers and on the co-ordination of rescue organizations (recommending the framing of a supranational scheme for mutual assistance). It further proposed that a special study be conducted on accident insurance for rescue workers operating outside their own countries. The Working Parties continued their examination of the technical and human problems within their particular purview, including more especially fire hazards, medical examination of personnel, the functions of the colliery medical services, and so on.

II. Work of the High Authority with regard to safety in mines

The work of the High Authority in connection with safety is mainly concerned with scientific and technical research, to which it contributes financially under Article 55 of the Treaty, and with information.

With regard to mining research proper, it is assisting several projects with a direct bearing on safety, including :

- (a) research on sudden outbursts of gas (methane or carbon dioxide or both) and coal bursts : 545,900 dollar units of account (Decision of September 3, 1958), plus a second appropriation for further research of 321,000 units of account (Decision of February 14, 1962);
- (b) research on indications of the presence and/or emission of firedamp in underground workings, for the purpose of working out suitable means of neutralizing this explosive gas in time : 1,228,000 dollar units of account (Decision of June 7, 1961);
- (c) a competition for measuring instruments : 200,000 dollar units of account (Decision of February 20, 1957). Competitors were required to design portable methanometers, portable threshold-value methane detectors, portable threshold-value oxygen indicators, carbon-monoxide recorders, and for improvements to existing types of self-rescue equipment (enabling miners to survive in a dangerous atmosphere until they are able to escape from it). The prizewinners received their awards in Luxembourg on February 9, 1962, except for the category "portable threshold-value oxygen indicators," for which the time-limit has been extended. The appropriation for this purpose was fixed at 70,000 dollar units of account;
- (d) research on the full mechanization of advancing face support, with the object of improving safety and reducing production costs : 550,000 dollar units of account (Decision of June 7, 1961);
- (e) research on strata pressure due to coal-getting operations : 1,168,800 dollar units of account (Decision of September 3, 1958);
- (f) development of a universal roadway-tunnelling machine enabling blasting and shotfiring to be entirely dispensed with : 856,750 dollar units of account (Decision of September 3, 1958).

Each project relates to several Community coalfields.

The High Authority has also helped to finance two research programmes on industrial medicine and one on industrial safety, the total appropriation set aside by it for this purpose amounting to 7 million dollar units of account.

1. The first industrial-medicine programme, for which 1.2 million dollar units of account were made available under a Decision of October 5, 1955, covered 164 projects, conducted by 72 research centres, on a series of subjects including early-stage detection of respiratory disorders, maximum endurable values in work at high temperatures, detection of deteriorations due to noise, and disorders caused by carbon monoxide.

2. The second industrial-medicine programme (appropriation 2.8 million units of account, under a Decision of April 7, 1960) is a continuation of the first, but also includes studies on the improvement of treatment for burns, together with assistance for the research work requested by the Mines Safety Commission.

3. The industrial-safety programme (appropriation 3 million units of account, under a Decision of December 5, 1957) is concerned more particularly with technical dust-suppression and dust-prevention measures, especially in coal-getting and in stowing; with dust measurement and observation of the effects of dust on the personnel; with the influence of human factors on industrial safety; and with improvements in the rehabilitation of accident victims and men suffering from occupational diseases.

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On the information side, in addition to publishing the findings of various studies conducted with financial assistance from the Community and disseminating the reports of the Mines Safety Commission on a considerable scale, the High Authority has organized a number of tours and seminars which have played their part in raising standards of safety.

For example, on March 27 and 28, 1961, 80 trade union officials concerned with safety in mines in the member countries attended a seminar at which they heard reports by the Commission on matters in connection with electrification, colliery medical services and operations in hot workings. They discussed the appointment and position of **colliery medical officers**, and desiderata regarding any duties performed in hot workings (prior medical test, maximum temperature permissible, prohibition of employment of juveniles or elderly miners, prohibition of payment at contract rates or piece rates for such duties).

Similarly, augmented seminars are held to enable the specialists and the men on the practical side to discuss various other subjects connected with health and safety.

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"Following the extraordinary session of the High Authority which was held on February 8, 1962, the day after the disaster at Luisenthal colliery at Völklingen, in the Saar, a communiqué was issued declaring that "this terrible disaster cannot but strengthen the High Authority's determination to continue as before to make every effort to achieve the maximum degree of safety in the mines, and more especially to do everything possible to promote research on the detection and elimination of firedamp."

The same point was emphasized by Herr Heinz Potthoff, Member of the High Authority, on February 9, 1962, to the 100 experts meeting in Luxembourg for the prizegiving ceremony of the safety equipment competition, and on February 12 to the Health Protection Committee of the European Parliament.