

Unions' responses to the Covid-19 crisis in Europe

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On International Workers' Day, it is important to recall the crucial role played by unions in protecting the workforce, especially at times of crisis.

The Covid-19 crisis is having a huge impact on the world of work. The International Labour Organization forecasts that the working-hours equivalent of 305 million full-time jobs will be lost in the first half of 2020—producing an army of unemployed at an unprecedented pace.

At the same time, large segments of the workforce have had to adapt to new ways of working, including working from home and using new technologies. For some other workers, the crisis has brought an intensification of work and increased exposure to health risks.



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How are unions in Europe responding?

Enforcing standards

The pivotal role of unions in ensuring enforcement of health-and-safety standards in the workplace has become even more central in the crisis. Among others, the Spanish union CCOO has set up a free phone hotline and email so that workers, especially from non-unionised companies, can report if safety protocols are not being followed.

Thanks to the public appeals of the UK shopworkers' union, USDAW, the main food stores there have installed protective screens at checkouts and introduced social-distancing measures for customers. Meanwhile, the Italian metalworking unions have signed a collective agreement with, among others, the Fiat Chrysler Group which provides detailed health-and-safety protocols in the workplace, ranging from the use of lifts to acceptable detergents and distancing rules on the shopfloor.

Italian unions have also played a crucial role in reminding business and government that public health must come before economic interests. They fought for the closure of non-essential economic activities, especially of manufacturing companies in Lombardy—a critical virus hotspot—against the opposition of employer associations. The government finally listened to their plea and closed these activities in late March.

Social dialogue

Collective bargaining typically softens the impact of economic restructuring on workers. Social dialogue has been successfully used in Austria, Switzerland and Germany, among

other cases, to develop short-time working (*Kurzarbeit*) arrangements, thereby preventing mass redundancies and allowing companies to retain staff, to ensure a prompt restart after the crisis.

In Bulgaria and Denmark a tripartite agreement among the government, unions and employers has set in train a temporary wage-subsidy scheme, to which companies can apply; it covers respectively 60 and 75 per cent of the wage bill. In Denmark a similar scheme also covers the self-employed and freelancers.

In France, the trade union confederation CFDT has negotiated with supplementary health-insurance schemes a solidarity fund for the hospitality sector, which has been most affected by the crisis. This allows employees and employers in the industry to be fully exempt from contributions for the second quarter of 2020, and to continue to be protected regardless of employment situation.

The expansion of sick leave has also been at the core of social dialogue. In Iceland unions used their sick leave funds to support members who had exhausted paid sick leave, while unions in Ireland, Italy and Sweden have successfully lobbied their governments to provide income support for extended sick leave and to extend coverage to the self-employed.

Smart working

Consultations between unions and employers typically underpin periods of technological and production transition, especially when these entail changes in work organisation or skill requirements. Tripartite agreements in Italy and Belgium set clear guidance for smart working, which is encouraged as economic activities are progressively allowed to reopen—for example by setting out employers' responsibilities in providing appropriate technologies and training, as well as regulating breaks and work pace.

In Germany the social-democratic minister of labour and social affairs, Hubertus Heil, has proposed enshrining the right to home-working in law, taking on board a reform of labour-market legislation which the German Trade Union Confederation has been advocating for the last two years.

While presenting the labour movement with immediate challenges, the current health crisis also represents a unique opportunity for trade unions to transform the narrative about the value of work. The crisis has turned upside-down common conceptions about who are 'key' workers in our post-industrial, knowledge economies: nurses, riders, logistical workers, delivery drivers, cleaners, manufacturing workers in the food industry and retail workers—among the lowest-paid and most precarious—have demonstrated in the public eye how valuable their work is.

This is a unique opportunity for unions to revive broader solidarities within society and to build support for a more equal wage distribution in the long term.