

COVID-19 WATCH

ETUC BRIEFING NOTE

OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH

15 APRIL 2020



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Trade union members are at the forefront of the battle against coronavirus and millions of workers are experiencing health and safety issues due to the outbreak. The epidemic has demonstrated very clearly the importance of protecting working people from disease.

In the framework of the enquiry to the ETUC member organisations, we have received reports about a series of problems relating to the health and safety of workers due to the COVID-19 outbreak, such as lack of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in the health sector, non-appliance of social distancing in the construction and retail sector and derogations to health and safety rules in the transport sector. We have also witnessed that social dialogue can play an effective role in identifying a range of measures at both national level and workplace level. We detail examples below that were adopted either as a result of social dialogue or governmental action.

One note of caution, this briefing note captures a dynamic situation which is subject to ongoing change. We therefore kindly ask affiliates to provide us with further information on COVID 19-related measures that have been introduced in your country so that we can update this briefing note.

- **Austria.** Social partners of the construction and retail sector have signed agreements with extra protective measures on occupational safety and health in the light of the coronavirus spread. In the construction sector, the agreement includes improved hygienic provisions and organisation measures appertaining to the separation of working and recreational areas, and minimum separation distances. Special protective measures have also been agreed for employees belonging to risk groups. In the retail sector, the agreement includes mainly opening hour restrictions for shops and a set of recommendations for employers to provide additional protective measures, such as use of plexiglass panels to provide "breath protection" to cashiers, provision of gloves and disinfectants to all workers, cashless payment and establishment of a maximum number of customers in a shop.
- **Belgium.** A ministerial order on emergency measures to limit the spread of the coronavirus imposes a cascade of measures on companies. Companies that wish to guarantee the continuity of their activities should apply social distancing (at a distance of 1.5 meters) in an operational and effective manner. This rule also applies to transport organised by the employer. If the authorities find that the social distancing measures are not observed, a heavy fine is imposed on the undertaking as a first step. The Group of 10 (one of the most important forums for social dialogue in Belgium, where the governing bodies of trade unions and employers' organisations meet) has stressed that (1) health regulations and social distancing must be respected, (2) telework must be organised wherever possible, (3) every effort must be made to respect these rules in essential sectors/companies (as defined by the ministerial order), and (4) these rules,

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and in particular social distancing, must be respected in so-called non-essential sectors/companies.

- **Denmark.** All employers should arrange telework whenever this is possible, both in the public and in the private sector. Gatherings of more than 10 people are not allowed, this applying also to the workplaces. A social distance of 2 meters should be observed everywhere. The labour inspectorate has used the force majeure clause to allow people to have less resting time to cope with the re-organisation that meeting the preventive measures may incur. Social partners have issued two joint declarations, at both regional and local governmental level, calling for the existing collective agreements to be used as the foundation to changes in the work organisation, also considering occupational safety and health provisions.
- **Ireland.** The government announced that all citizens should remain at home for 2 weeks for the time being starting on March 29th, except a list of specific essential services workers. Unions are in dialogue with the government to clarify any ambiguities that may emerge regarding this “essential” list. Measures sought by unions have been introduced to ensure social distancing on public transport. The government has given commitments that the Health and Safety Authority (HSA, the Irish inspection service) will be performing inspections and can close workplaces, including building sites, if non-compliant. The HSA, however, has still not recovered from cuts implemented during years of austerity and there are concerns about its capacity – with limited numbers of inspectors and resources – to respond speedily and adequately to any breaches. The Irish Government has provided a set of information resources to employers and employees with general protective measures as well as specific recommendations to health workers and dentists. The latter refer to standard precautions with patients, hygiene and appropriate use of personal protective equipment, including donning and doffing PPE and the managing of fatigue. An extensive guide has been published on the management of health care workers contact exposure in the workplace, with specific provisions for some groups (such as those who have been advised to restrict their movements but are identified as essential for critical services and other vulnerable health care workers).
- **Finland.** A working group appointed by the Prime Minister’s Office is working on a plan for the way out of the COVID-19 crisis in Finland which will be released on May 1st. Social partners are represented in a sub-group, which is also supported by a scientific panel with experts from various fields.
- **Italy.** On March 14th, the three main trade union confederations of Italy (CGIL, CISL and UIL), the Government and the employers’ organisations reached an agreement for a Protocol on regulation of measures for the containment of the COVID-19 in workplaces (private sector). The protocol specifically details some of the obligations under Legislative Decree no. 81/2008 (on occupational safety and health), with particular regard to the content of information due to workers and employees, the obligations of daily cleaning operations and periodic sanitation of workplaces and work

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tools (including computers, squeegees and screens), hygiene precautions (with related arrangement of disinfectant cleaning liquids), personal protective equipment (PPE), work place arrangement to guarantee the minimum distance of one meter. A Protocol including several extraordinary provisions on occupational safety and health for public servants has been reached on April 3rd. On March 20th, the three main trade union confederations of Italy (CGIL, CISL and UIL), the Ministry of Transport and the employers' organisations reached an agreement for a Protocol for the containment of the COVID-19 in the transport and logistical sector. The protocol includes several extraordinary provisions on occupational safety and health, on prevention fields such as sanitation, work place arrangement to guarantee the minimum distance of one meter (between co-workers and with customers), guarantee of personal protective equipment (PPE), suspension of the sale on board and ticket control by the staff of road and railway transport, guaranteeing measures for loading and unloading of goods without contact, among others. In which respect to the specific situation of healthcare workers, in Italy there has been an agreement signed with the government regarding the distribution of PPE and verification of the quality of PPE, and an increase in testing for all health personnel exposed to the contagion.

- **Slovenia.** Contention measures of self-isolation were adopted as from March 8th, together with respecting 2 meters between people at all public spaces, workplaces included. The trade union SDTS (member of the confederation ZSSS) negotiated with its employers' counterparts the terms for reduced opening hours for food shops. In the manufacturing industry, upon initiative of trade unions, a dedicated campaign of occupational safety and health specialists and the labour inspectorate is assessing the need to close some workplaces if preventive measures cannot be observed.
- **Spain.** The Ministry of Health has published an "Action procedure for occupational risk prevention services against exposure to the new coronavirus (SARS-COV-2)". The most representative Spanish trade union confederations have expressed concerns on some of the provisions included. Specific occupational safety and health measures have been established workers as well as protocols related to workers either in casual or frequent contact with infected people. Spain is now witnessing a sensitive stage in the response against the pandemic in which some sectors are returning to activity. In order to face this, trade unions have recommended the negotiation of sectorial guidelines on OSH. Some have already been agreed in the construction and industrial sector, among others. Spain faces a problem of lack of PPEs so it is recommended that where possible, organizational measures are adopted such as social distancing and teleworking.
- **Sweden.** The Swedish Work Environment Authority is monitoring the risk assessment undertaken by employers to contain the virus spread. Some companies are employing half of their staff to prevent the spread of the virus whereas being able to maintain production. Also, telework is encouraged to those workers who are able to do so. The Government has also decided to temporarily discontinue the sickness benefit qualifying day. Sick pay is hereby paid from the first day at home. The purpose of this change is to encourage people to stay at home even when having mild symptoms.

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- **Turkey.** Administrative leave is provided promptly for those who are 65+ years, pregnant and for those who have chronic diseases. Thus, the biggest risk group could have a chance to be in self-isolation without any concern regarding the work. The Government supports and ensures flexible remote working by realising it at the public workplaces.
- At **European level**, the social partners of the food manufacturing sector (EFFAT and FoodDrinkEurope) have developed guidelines to support their members in dealing with the COVID-19 outbreak. The guidelines include recommendations on information to employees, hygiene practices, review of work organisations, management of employee sickness, transport and delivery of food, and travel to and from work.