

ETUC Resolution on the Need for EU Action to Protect Workers from High Temperatures

Adopted at the Executive Committee Meeting of 18-19 December 2019

Background

When the workplace gets too hot it is more than just an issue of comfort. When the temperature goes too high, as was the case during the summer of 2018, then it can become a real health and safety issue.

Given the fact that average temperatures are likely to increase over coming years as a result of global warming this is a problem that is likely to increase. It is also a problem that is usually relatively easy to resolve, demonstrating the value of trade union led health and safety campaigns.

High Temperatures: What is at Stake?

When workers get too hot, they risk dizziness, fainting and heat cramps. In very hot conditions the body's blood temperature rises. If blood temperature rises above 39°C, there is a risk of heat stroke or collapse. There is increasing evidence that occupational heat stress is linked to kidney disease among outdoor workers. Even at lower temperatures heat leads to a loss of concentration and increased tiredness, which means that workers are more likely to put themselves and others at risk. High temperatures mean there is an increase in the likelihood of accidents due to reduced concentration; slippery, sweaty palms as well as an increase of discomfort of some personal protective gear which can result in reduced protection through inappropriate usage or non-usage.

Heat can also aggravate other medical conditions and illnesses such as high blood pressure or heart disease due to increased load on the heart as well as interacting with, or increasing the effect of, other workplace hazards. Pregnant women are at particular risk from high temperatures and specific arrangements need to be put in place to ensure that they are protected.

Ordinarily people work best at a temperature between 16°C and 24°C, although this can vary depending on the kind of work being done. Strenuous work is better performed at a lower temperature than office work.

The Need for Action at EU Level

Workers in Europe should never have to work in temperatures that place their health at risk. As the world's leading trading bloc, the EU should lead the way in working conditions by ensuring workplaces with safe temperatures. In an era of climate change in which difficult weather conditions are likely to be more frequent and more extreme, it is essential that there are the appropriate legislative instruments in place to protect workers with clear roles and responsibilities for policy-makers, employers and trade unions representatives.

The temperature challenges facing workers in Europe vary greatly, as do the rights to which they have recourse for protection. Those engaged in strenuous and arduous work are at particular risk to extreme temperatures as the inherent difficulties are compounded by the additional stress factors caused by the work – though definitions of what constitutes arduous work across Europe remain opaque.

The protections that workers enjoy across Europe vary greatly. ETUC data has recently shown that there is a wide range of minimum temperature permissible in European workplaces across different Member States and different sectors—from just 4°C to as high as 20°C depending on the type of work. Likewise, maximum limits show significant variance from as low as 18°C to as high as 35°C. Some of these limits are statutory, some are collectively bargained while others are a combination.

ETUC Plan of Action

ETUC affiliates overwhelmingly support action at the European level to protect workers from high temperatures and to prepare for a future in which these challenges are likely to present more frequently.

The ETUC therefore commits:

- To work, through the ETUC Health and Safety committee, to identify a series of actions to promote the issue of safe and healthy working temperatures. This will include developing guidance to issue to affiliates that will address different work environments and temperatures;
- To raise the issue of unsafe working temperatures with both the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) and the Advisory Committee on Health and Safety at Work (ACHS) with a view to raising the profile of this risk;
- To launch a day of action in June 2019, timed to coincide with the June ETUC Executive Committee, which will generate publicity for the demands;
- To call upon the European Commission to introduce a legislative instrument that recognises this increased risk to workers and provides a framework for protecting workers. Weather conditions do not respect national borders and so European action is required.
- Demands that European employers' organisations take this issue seriously by issuing guidance to their affiliates on how they can protect their workers from unsafe temperatures for work both indoors and outdoors. The ETUC is ready to work with the employers in developing this.
- Commits to pursuing these objectives throughout the course of the next European Commission and Parliament mandate.