

ETUC resolution on vaccination schemes

Adopted at the Executive Committee Meeting of 16-17 March 2022

Over the past months, a steep increase in Covid-19 infection rates has been observed in several European countries. The Omicron variant spread rapidly this winter, therefore making the need for strong action to reduce transmission more needed and urgent to – inter alia – maintain the operability of healthcare systems manageable and to protect the most vulnerable groups in society.

Most of the EU Member States do not have mandatory vaccination schemes in place, yet a growing number of countries have set mandatory vaccination for healthcare workers and/or workers in long-term care facilities. Only a few have launched mandatory vaccination schemes to all groups within an age category. Almost all EU Member States use so-called “green passes” to protect workers against Covid-19.

By the end of 2021, close to 80% of the EU’s adult population was fully vaccinated yet with significant difference between Member States¹. ETUC regrets that other regions of the world are struggling to vaccinate even a small number of citizens. Besides the human right argument that all citizens deserve equal access to health, the Covid-19 will not be overcome if it is not eradicated globally. Consequently, ETUC supports the international trade union movement’s urgent call on the European Commission, to take all actions needed to make Covid-19 vaccines available for all, and to support the temporary and targeted ‘TRIPS waiver’.

ETUC has been at the forefront of the fight against the pandemic on different fronts, OSH prevention being one noteworthy line of action. Our Covid-19 watch briefing notes have contributed to the exchange of experiences between ETUC member organisations. A briefing note on mandatory vaccination schemes was issued in autumn 2021 and updated frequently since its publication date.

Support for voluntary vaccination schemes

ETUC supports access to vaccination to European citizens and opposes the anti-vaccination movement. False or misleading arguments around vaccination put lives at risk. ETUC joins the efforts of the European Commission and national member states to fight against misinformation and disinformation. ETUC condemns the instrumentalisation of the anti-vaccination movement by extreme right-wing movements against democracy. The attack against the CGIL headquarters in October 2021 are a shameful example of these criminal acts.

The gap between vaccination rates in different European countries demonstrates the possible impact of well-organised vaccination campaigns. ETUC support efforts to improve vaccination schemes and the adoption of best practices. As many people as possible must be persuaded to vaccinate both practically, e.g., by easy access and outreach vaccination services, and intellectually, e.g., by educational campaigns and the fortified fight against disinformation. The swift improvement of voluntary vaccination schemes must be the main focus of vaccine policies.

Strong role for trade unions to make workplaces safe

The Covid-19 pandemic is not only a public health issue but also an occupational health issue, as evidenced by the role of the workplace as a vector of contagion in some

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/safe-covid-19-vaccines-europeans_en

economic sectors. ETUC welcomes the strong recommendation enshrined in the new OSH Strategic Framework of the European Commission towards Member States to acknowledge COVID-19 as an occupational disease. It is unacceptable that employers may be advocating for the mandatory nature of vaccines while at the same time denying the occupational dimension of the pandemic.

Trade unions demand to be involved in the further development and implementation of occupational health and safety rules within the entire workplace. The hierarchy of protective measures must be observed, and technical and organisational measures must be implemented first. The aim is not only to protect against infections, but also to keep the burden on workers as low as possible. For this to succeed, trade unions and workplace representatives must be involved, and their comprehensive expertise taken into account.

In some member states vaccinations are not part of an OSH regimen, due to lack of protection against infections. Therefore, the focus must be to prevent contagion and at no time vaccinations should replace OSH measures, like telework, the respect to social distancing or the provision of personal protective equipment, to name but a few.

ETUC acknowledges that the vaccination of workers prevents the spreading of the Covid-19 virus and contribute to protecting against severe illness in cases of contagion. The appropriate preventive measures (including risks assessment and risk management), of which employers are liable as foreseen in the Framework Directive, should apply in the framework of the protection of the health of workers in light of contagion during the Covid-19 pandemic.

ETUC acknowledges that mandatory vaccination requirements may potentially interfere with human rights, including the right to freedom, to privacy, to bodily integrity, to freedom of religion, to freedom of assembly, to work, to education, to travel and to adequate housing, and may infringe the right to equal treatment. International human rights legislation however recognises an explicit right to health and a duty to take steps necessary for the “prevention, treatment and control of epidemic [...] diseases²” and the European Court of Human Rights has also recognised a right to health as a justification for “mandatory vaccination schemes”. The restriction to the enjoyment of these rights is justified with the legitimate aim of protecting the life and health of European citizens.

ETUC calls for continued action at European level, and in the Member States, to ensure that workplaces become safe from Covid 19. All measures should be democratically discussed and must be with the involvement of trade unions. It is particularly important that measures are proportionate and strike a fair balance between the importance of the goal and the burden it places on the individual.

² UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, art 12(2)(c))