

Italy: social partners sign protocol on measures to battle coronavirus in the workplace

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Pressed by the government to establish uniform guidelines to guarantee the safety of employees in the workplace, the Cgil, Cisl and Uil unions and the employer organisations Confindustria, Confapi and Confartigianato (large and small industrial and craft enterprises) reached a memorandum of understanding on Saturday. It took the social partners 18 hours of negotiations to develop these operational guidelines, which apply as of today to all companies. An agreement was much needed, with workers spontaneously walking out last week in different factories and strikes continuing, particularly in the engineering and metal industries. Several of the country's major groups, starting with the automobile giant FCA, have announced the suspension of their production.

Protect employees. The 13-point protocol, which defines procedures and operational guidelines to combat and contain the spread of the coronavirus, states from its preamble that "production activities can only continue if the conditions needed to ensure the protection of employees are in place". Industrial companies may resort to the so-called 'cassa integrazione' (technical unemployment) so as to reduce or suspend all or part of their business. Trade unionists have expressed satisfaction with an agreement that they believe puts worker health and safety above economic profits.

Flu symptoms and fever. All employees who have a temperature above 37.5°C are prohibited from going to work. The protocol sets out the obligation for employees to report possible flu symptoms and contact with people who have tested positive for coronavirus to their employer. If an employee should develop symptoms (fever, cough, etc.) while they are at work, they must immediately report it to the personnel department and the company must put them into isolation, as well as the other persons present on the premises for the time needed to notify health authorities. The protocol explicitly allows employers to measure the temperature of employees before they access company premises, while highlighting that this constitutes personal data which must therefore be processed in accordance with GDPR. In this regard, the protocol suggests flagging the temperature but not recording it and underlines that in the event of temporary isolation due to a high temperature, employers must guarantee the dignity of workers. In another register, the company doctor must report to the company all situations of vulnerability and existing or past conditions of employees, and the company must protect these employees.

Employer obligations. Companies must ensure daily cleaning and regular disinfection of production premises and sites, and make hydroalcoholic gels available to workers. If the organisation cannot guarantee the safe distance of one metre between workers, the company must provide masks, gloves, shirts, etc. Access to common spaces (canteens, changing rooms, etc.) and time spent therein must be limited, and companies must ensure continuous ventilation in these areas and that they are regularly disinfected, as well as respect for the safe distance of one metre. Entry and exit times must be staggered and companies must plan shift rotations to minimise contact between employees. Travel within the company must be limited to the strict minimum and physical meetings are not allowed, except in the event of emergency or absolute necessity, in which case they must meet strict criteria. All services which are not directly linked to production (such as administration) will be closed or with employees working remotely. Finally, companies will have to set up a committee to guarantee the application and compliance with the protocol, with the participation of staff representatives.

Spontaneous strikes and plant closures. Will these measures be enough to reassure employees? Strike action took place at several establishments last week, particularly in the engineering and metal industries. On Thursday, the FIOM-Cgil, FIM-Cisl and UILM unions demanded a temporary closure of all factories, so they can be disinfected and reorganised in line with health requirements. The situation is changing from hour to hour: automobile giant FCA has just announced the suspension until 27 March of production in most of its factories in Europe (including those in Melfi, Pomigliano and Cassino in Italy). Meanwhile Ferrari, one of the symbols of 'Made in Italy', has closed its legendary sites in Maranello and Modena for the same period of time.

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