



Telework: my right, my decision

A campaign by industriAll Europe that sheds light on the advantages and the dangers of imposed telework for workers





Telework: my right, my decision

IndustriAll European Trade Union pushes for regulated, worker-friendly teleworking in its new campaign

Nearly one year into the COVID-19 pandemic, telework has become an essential feature of the world of work and it is here to stay. With our new campaign ‘Telework: my right, my decision’, industriAll Europe starts a discussion on the positive and negative aspects for workers and highlights the need to regulate telework.

For industriAll Europe, the decision for or against telework must become an individual right, and this must include the right to revert the decision. Collective bargaining will be essential to negotiate the conditions for a worker-friendly telework option.

Telework is here to stay

During the first lockdown, nearly 40% of workers in the EU were reported to have switched to telework. Given that the pandemic has accelerated technology dissemination and the digitalisation of work, these numbers can be expected to have increased further. A

recent report by the OECD suggests that “widespread telework may remain a permanent feature of the future working environment”.

If until now most employers were skeptical about telework, many of them are starting to recognise its advantages and consider switching to telework on a permanent basis.

With our campaign we intend to highlight positive and negative aspects of teleworking for workers and promote the regulation of telework. Only by regulating telework can we ensure that the advantages prevail and drawbacks are minimised.

Isabelle Barthès,
Deputy General Secretary of industriAll Europe

Car manufacturer PSA, for example, has announced that it will be moving all its employees who are not engaged in production into telework. This concerns 80,000 workers out of a global workforce of 200,000. Recent surveys* suggest that companies are planning to reduce office space, as many employees will be working remotely on a permanent basis.

Telework requires rules and social partner involvement

Telework has allowed work to continue where this was feasible and help protect workers from exposure to the virus. However, it was also imposed. For industriAll Europe, it is now essential that the decision for or against telework becomes a choice and an individual right. This must include the right to revert the decision to telework.

Crucially, if telework becomes a permanent feature of our working lives, trade unions and employers must negotiate and jointly set the conditions to regulate it. This will ensure that telework becomes an advantage for workers and not only a cost-reduction business strategy.

During the pandemic, telework had to be organised in many cases without pre-existing rules concerning equipment, working conditions, working time, data protection, social protection (including accident and health insurance) and without training in the new work methods. Trade unions are rising to the challenge and are increasingly involved in negotiations to regulate telework. Negotiations are taking place at all levels, but in the case of telework, company-level agreements are essential to define tailor-made arrangements that correspond to a company's reality.

Our campaign

IndustriAll European Trade Union recognises the advantages, but also the potential dangers of teleworking for workers. We have formulated our initial demands in a recently adopted position, summarised in our campaign leaflet. Over the next five weeks, our campaign 'Telework: My Right, My Choice' will cast light on the complex aspects of telework and present trade union demands to ensure that telework benefits workers.

The campaign will be carried out through publications on our website and social media.

Isabelle Barthès, Deputy General Secretary of industriAll Europe, launched the campaign:

"Telework became an essential part of our working life almost overnight and trade unions had to rise to this challenge. At industriAll Europe, we recognised the urgency to respond to this development and decided to launch our campaign 'Telework: my right, my decision'.

"With our campaign we intend to highlight positive and negative aspects of teleworking for workers and promote the regulation of telework. Only by regulating telework can we ensure that the advantages prevail and drawbacks are minimised. Collective bargaining at all levels will be key to ensure a worker-friendly telework option."

Initially published on 23 February 2021 on industriAll Europe's website: [read the original article here](#).

* Deloitte's European CFO Survey Autumn 2020 revealed that in Germany 4 out of 10 chief financial officers plan to reduce office capacities. A survey of the European Round Table for Industry (ERT) found that 81% of their leaders expect to reduce office space and air travel due to the increasing prevalence and practicality of telework.



Worker-friendly teleworking needs clear regulation

Telework became an emergency solution at the start of the COVID-19 crisis to keep businesses going. With telework here to stay, even after the pandemic, industriAll Europe insists that telework is regulated with social partners' involvement to ensure a worker-friendly telework option that works for all.

Regulating telework is a central demand of industriAll European Trade Union's campaign 'Telework: my right, my decision'. Clear rules are needed to ensure that telework becomes an advantage for workers and not simply a cost-reduction strategy of business, eventually leading to outsourcing of work that can be performed by company employees. Regulation must occur in line with national systems and practices, and collective bargaining at all levels is a key instrument. In the case of telework, company-level bargaining is essential to ensure that working arrangements meet workers' needs and correspond to the reality of each enterprise.

Teleworking must be voluntary

Telework does not suit all workers and it is important to ensure that it remains a voluntary right. Workers should be able to choose whether to telework or to work at the office.

Mixed options that combine telework with office work are needed, as studies confirm that teleworking is positive for workers as long as it is not permanent, and where presence at the workplace is possible at least a couple of days a week. In a recent report, the OECD highlights that more widespread teleworking may harm long-term innovation and decrease worker well-being. The report stresses that policymakers through social partners' involvement must ensure that "teleworking remains a choice and is not 'overdone.'"

Only through clear regulation with social partner involvement can telework succeed to the advantage of workers and contribute to a well-functioning labour market in Europe.

Isabelle Barthès,
Deputy General Secretary of industriAll Europe

The voluntary principle is therefore the starting point of trade union demands regarding the regulation of telework.

Telework is not a guarantee for health and safety

While telework can protect workers from contracting infectious diseases, like COVID-19, at the workplace or during the commute, it is not a guarantee for health and safety.

Since the start of the pandemic, feedback received from workers and their representatives about telework points to a significant increase in musculoskeletal complaints and psychological strains linked to inadequate equipment, long and irregular working hours, work-life imbalance, the lack of social interaction and feelings of isolation. Unions therefore demand that protecting the health and safety of workers has a central place in regulating telework. Regulation must ensure a proper working environment without physical and psycho-social risks.

Employers are responsible for providing workers with the necessary good quality equipment to telework, as well as encouraging continuous interaction among colleagues and formulating and respecting clear rules on working time.

Working time flexibility is welcome, but with limits

Working time conditions need to be properly regulated to respect national regulation and/or collective agreements. Unpaid overtime must be avoided and pushes towards excessive flexibility should be resisted. However, the classic solution of fixing working time is of limited use in a telework context, given that workers may wish or need to take advantage of more autonomy in organising their working day. Together with the workers they represent, trade unions will find the best solutions in collective agreements. More flexibility and autonomy must be to the workers' advantage. It should result in a better work-life balance, and not in unpaid overtime and psychological strains due to pressure to be flexible and always available. The right to disconnect must be fully granted and respected.

During exceptional situations, like the current pandemic, solutions must be found for teleworkers who have care responsibilities due to closed facilities.

Finally, regulation must guarantee teleworkers the same rights and opportunities as all other workers. This includes the right to benefit from collective agreements, the right to contact and to join a union, the right to training and lifelong learning, as well as the possibility for promotion.

Isabelle Barthès, industriAll Europe's Deputy Secretary General:

“Telework must be regulated through national legislation or collective agreements to benefit workers. Regulating telework will also give clarity to employers. In our campaign 'Telework: my right, my decision', industriAll Europe puts forward guidelines on how telework should be regulated to ensure respect for essential teleworkers' rights, such as health and safety, working time, workers' privacy, and so on. Only through clear regulation with social partner involvement can telework succeed to the advantage of workers and contribute to a well-functioning labour market in Europe.

Initially published on 2 March 2021 on industriAll Europe's website: [read the original article here](#).



Telework for a better work-life balance

Unravelling the traps of telework: telework can lead to a better work-life balance, but only if women are not pushed back at home.

Telework can have both positive and negative aspects for workers, and what initially appears to be an advantage can easily turn into a disadvantage. This is especially the case when telework is imposed.

Trade unions recognise the advantages of teleworking, such as reducing the environmental footprint by limiting transport, improving work-life balance, greater flexibility and more autonomy for workers.

Unfortunately, teleworking can also turn into a trap. This can be the case especially for women if they end up having to juggle work, household and care responsibilities. Given that teleworking is often associated with working longer hours and unpaid working time, women are at a double disadvantage due to the existing gender pay gap.

Telework cannot be a substitute for public childcare and other care provision.

In the context of a pandemic, solutions must be found for teleworkers who shoulder care responsibilities due to closed facilities. It is vital that telework does not become an excuse for pushing women into staying at home. In extreme cases of difficult private relations, this can mean forcing people to stay at home with an abusive partner. The pandemic showed that compulsory telework decreases the chances to seek outside help and has led to an increase in domestic violence.

Women especially risk falling into the teleworking trap if they have to juggle between work, household and care responsibilities.

Isabelle Barthès,
Deputy General Secretary of industriAll Europe

Another trap for workers can result from pressure to continue teleworking in case of illness. Trade unions already suspect that this is the case. Studies conducted before the pandemic have shown that telework leads to reduced absenteeism.

Telework should not increase gender inequality or force workers to work when they should be recovering from an illness. It should represent an advantage for workers. For telework to become an instrument for a better work-life balance, workers must have the right to decide whether to use it or not. Proper regulation, with the involvement of social partners, must ensure that telework does not replace any form of sick leave, care leave, maternity leave or parental leave.

Trade unions, through collective bargaining, can ensure properly regulated telework that gives workers who decide to telework the same rights and opportunities as all other workers, especially regarding career development, getting promoted and occupying leadership positions. Through collective agreements, unions can ensure that working time conditions are the same, no matter where the work is carried out, especially by guaranteeing the right to disconnect.

More flexibility and autonomy will then benefit workers and their work-life balance, and not result in unpaid overtime, pressure to be flexible and always available, and huge psychological strains.

Isabelle Barthès, industriAll Europe's Deputy Secretary General:

“Telework can certainly bring advantages for workers and lead to a better work-life balance. We must be aware of the traps, however. Women especially risk falling into the teleworking trap if they have to juggle between work, household and care responsibilities. Workers must have the right to decide whether to telework or not.”

Initially published on 8 March 2021 on industriAll Europe's website: [read the original article here](#).



Telework must not lead to excessive surveillance of workers

As more companies use surveillance technology to monitor their (tele)workers, **industriAll Europe demands full respect of workers' privacy and autonomy through a strict limitation of data collection and usage in line with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).**

The pandemic has led to a massive push towards telework and has also increased the use of workers' surveillance technology. More and more companies are using different digital software to monitor employee activity and performance. Very often, workers are unaware that they are being monitored because the installation of the software is presented as a regular update. Often workers do not know which personal data is collected, how it is used and with whom it is shared.

Surveillance and AI: How does the technology work?

Surveillance technologies go hand in hand with artificial intelligence (AI). The technology used to track, gather and evaluate workers is based on different algorithms. Workers and their representatives need to know what the algorithm is measuring and what it is evaluating.

For example, some algorithms measure productivity by tracking the time workers spend at their desk or how much they type. Others even go as far as tracking the GPS coordinates of their employees and taking pictures with computer cameras. Managers then receive a ranking of the most productive workers based on random indicators (like how much a worker types), that indicate nothing about a worker's true performance and productivity.

Effects on Workers

Excessive surveillance can have extremely negative effects on workers' wellbeing, mental health and autonomy. It can lead to job intensification, increased competition with other colleagues, high levels of stress, anxiety, demotivation, as well as low self-esteem.

Surveillance technologies have the capacity to evaluate workers by rating them and even discipline workers in cases where algorithms lead to a direct dismissal or reward. They can also profile workers based on personal data and end up taking decisions on their behalf.

Respect workers' privacy, autonomy and human dignity

This situation raises serious questions regarding workers' health and safety, privacy, autonomy and respect of human dignity.

As trade unions, we demand the strict protection of workers' personal data and privacy in compliance with the GDPR. We request that the boundaries between private and working life are respected through the right to disconnect. Workers and their representatives must be informed about employee-related data that is collected and the reasons for it. The algorithms used must be fully justifiable and fair.

The EU Social Partner's Agreement on Digitalisation provides the necessary tools for workers and their union representatives to take (back) control of workers' private data and to ensure their autonomy. This Agreement must now be implemented at national level by the social partners.

Isabelle Barthès, industriAll Europe's Deputy Secretary General:

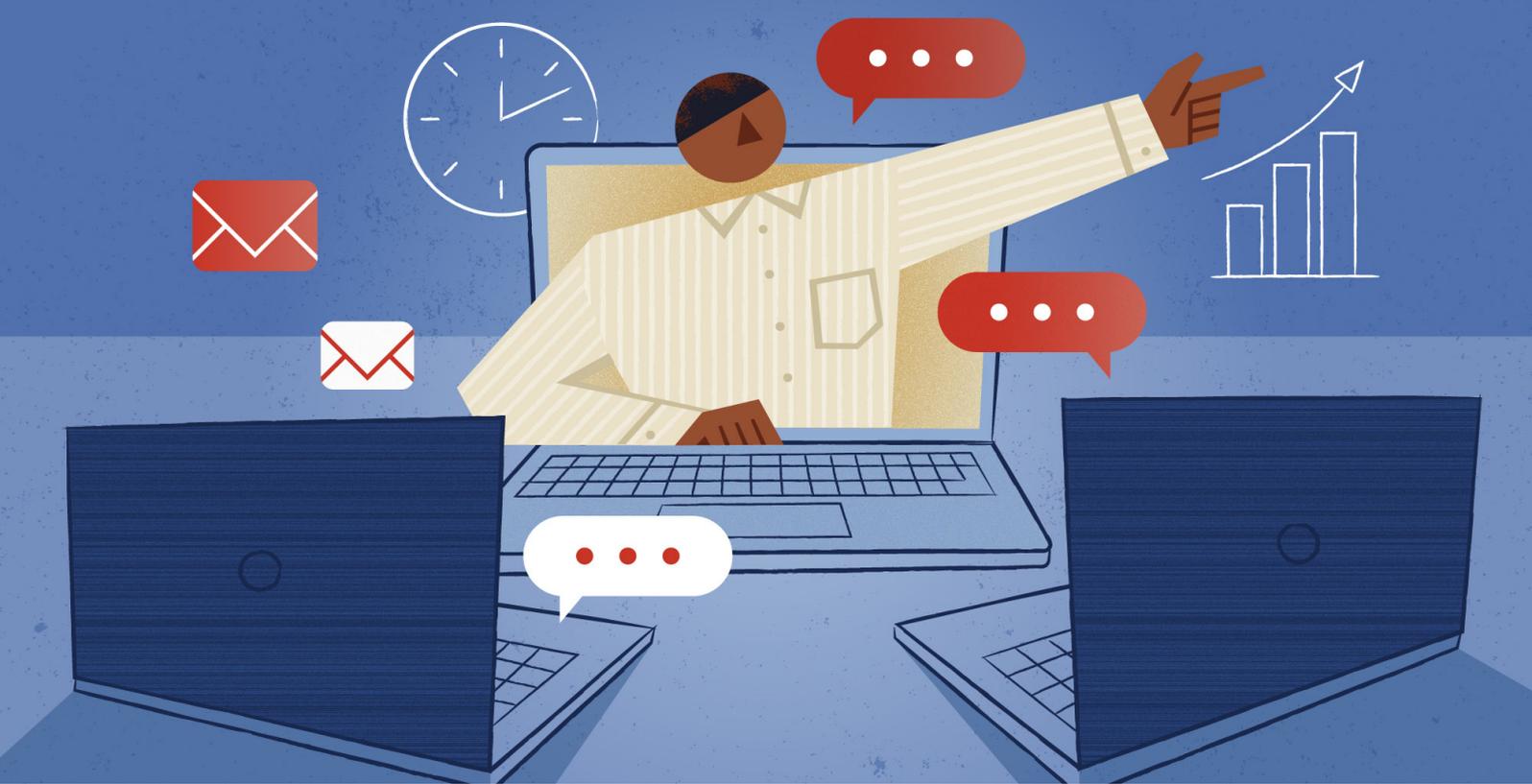
“Working remotely cannot be an excuse to control workers beyond what is justified and beyond the limits of human dignity. Working remotely should be an opportunity to create new work relationships based on trust, in full respect of work regulations. This should be properly framed through collective agreements that focus on the development of confidentiality and security policies. The EU Social Partner Agreement on Digitalisation provides a good starting point for this.”

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Working remotely cannot be an excuse to control workers beyond what is justified and beyond the limits of human dignity. Working remotely should be an opportunity to create new work relationships based on trust, in full respect of work regulations.

Isabelle Barthès,
Deputy General Secretary of industriAll Europe





Telework: the challenge of managing teams during a pandemic and beyond

The specific needs of managers in our sectors require attention. IndustriAll Europe insists that companies assist their managers in supervising remote teams through training and best practice exchanges. Establishing a trust-based culture is essential for a worker-friendly telework – for managers and subordinates alike.

With the unforeseen increase of telework during the pandemic, team managers in our sectors have faced a dual challenge: fulfilling their responsibility for team members' well-being and ensuring uninterrupted performance.

Teleworking has reportedly often led to increased workloads for managerial staff: more “checking in” with individual team members, more virtual co-ordination meetings, etc. Trade unions belonging to IndustriAll Europe's White-Collar Working Group have voiced their concerns about the impact of increased teleworking on managerial staff. They report that many managers have found a higher level of psychological stress as they have felt pressured to ensure and prove to their own superiors the same level of performance of their teams as in pre-pandemic times.

Others felt mostly responsible for subordinates' well-being, making a much greater effort to accommodate unusual working times or fewer working hours if team members were, for example, faced with childcare responsibilities due to closed schools.

The impact of pandemic telework on managers differs across countries, sectors and between companies. Where a certain level of experience with remote working and a culture of trust already exists, the effects are perceived less strongly. Where there was little or no experience, managers have felt the pressure much more strongly. They were not prepared for entirely new ways of working. Many used to assess their team members' performance by checking their presence in a physical office and have found it difficult to switch to assessing actual output.

However, even where a culture of trust and experience with telework already existed and performance was measured by output, managers have reported some difficulties after switching to full-time telework, including giving feedback, “onboarding new employees”, spotting and resolving misunderstandings*, and a certain loss of creativity as brain storming sessions and spontaneous coordination have become impossible.

Isabelle Barthès, Deputy General Secretary, industriAll Europe:

“We can learn a lot from this experience. Firstly, trust. This is fundamental, and social dialogue at every level is a must. Companies must assess their work culture and, where necessary, assist their managers through training and the exchange of best practice techniques.”

“A post-pandemic world should offer a mix of telework and in-person meetings. This is essential for sharing knowledge, learning through interactions with colleagues, for working creatively and for establishing and maintaining good working relations. Social dialogue and collective agreements can create the right conditions for everyone. It is essential that we also keep the specific needs of managers in mind.”

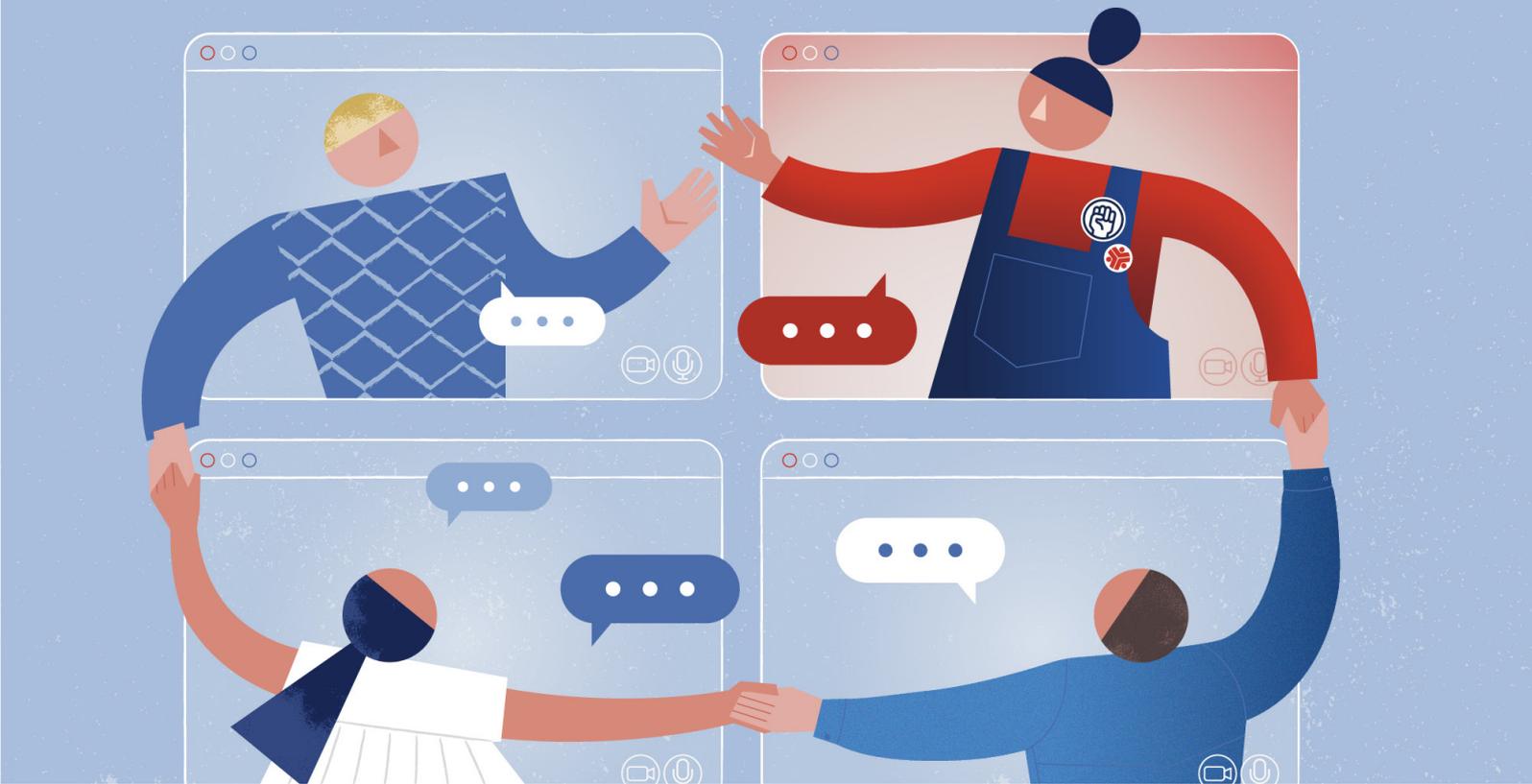
Initially published on 24 March 2021 on industriAll Europe’s website: [read the original article here](#).

Trust is fundamental. Companies must assess their work culture and, where necessary, assist their managers through training and the exchange of best practice techniques.

Isabelle Barthès,
Deputy General Secretary of industriAll Europe



* IDA “Det fleksible arbejdsliv – det bæredygtige arbejdsliv” survey among members, 2020



Organising teleworkers – Yes, we can!

Telework is here to stay and unions need to learn how to organise workers online and address their concerns. Experience since the pandemic shows that this is possible but requires unions to rethink their working methods and find new ways to communicate with workers.

During the first lockdown prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, nearly 40% of workers in the European Union were reported to have switched to telework. While the pandemic will eventually end, teleworking may remain, for good. This change will also affect our industries. Workers who operate fully or partially outside factory or office premises will need the protection of a union and a collective agreement. But how should unions organise teleworkers and communicate with them?

There are already many good examples from 2020 that show organising was possible online. IndustriAll Europe reported about the Finnish Metal Workers' Union digital organising campaign and the hybrid campaign of the Czech union, OS KOVO.

So how do we reach workers who operate from home?

Getting workers' contact details is labour-intensive and takes time. Organising teleworkers is more challenging than it is for those in the workplace.

You need a proper contact list, because you cannot meet 'in person' and creativity is often needed. Some affiliates search for contacts using social media, others go to court to receive the contact data of the employees. Once this problem is solved, it should be possible for unions to reach even wider circles of workers.

The pandemic has prompted a steep learning curve and people are now used to digital communication and online meetings.

Trust is fundamental. Companies must assess their work culture and, where necessary, assist their managers through training and the exchange of best practice techniques.

Isabelle Barthès,
Deputy General Secretary of industriAll Europe



The pandemic has also given us an idea of how unions should develop their ways of working in a ‘new’ world where telework is increasing. It requires changes to the way unions communicate with existing and potential members, carry out organising, collective bargaining and training.

The Unions 21 report summarises some of the key lessons learned from the pandemic year 2020:

- New forms of effective online communication enable unions to engage with more workers, listen to their concerns, and understand their needs.
- Unions need to rethink their communication methods, upgrade and refine their infrastructure, and train the staff and union reps.
- Making it easier to join the union should include a user-friendly online joining system.
- Integrating social media (particularly Facebook Messenger) into the union’s formal communication channels is a recognition of the fact that increasing numbers of members contact their union in this way.
- Email remains the quickest way to share information with workers. This requires a comprehensive and up-to-date register.
- Retention work is valuable: going through a list of recently resigned members and calling them has led to a healthy number re-joining the union.
- Visibility is important: lots of people have joined because they have been impressed by the role the union has played in fighting for the industry.

Isabelle Barthès, industriAll Europe’s Deputy General Secretary, says:

“teleworkers must be able to enjoy the same rights as all other workers, including the right to join a union, collective bargaining and training. By using innovative means of communication, unions can reach teleworkers and show that collective action is the best way to address their concerns.”

Organising works when people realise that their membership of the union serves their interests and when they themselves can contribute to actively shaping their working environment. Telework does not change this. The challenge now is to keep that momentum and the links that have been created.

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Teletwork: my right, my decision

Teletwork – a worker’s enemy?

Threats of unregulated teletwork

-  **Permanent & imposed teletwork**, motivated by employers’ attempts to save costs at the expense of workers’ wellbeing.
-  **Working Time**: Overtime which is not recorded and therefore unpaid needs to be controlled and properly regulated.
-  **Health & Safety**: Musculoskeletal complaints from non-ergonomic working conditions, long & irregular working hours, work-life imbalance, psychological strains due to lack of social interaction, and feelings of isolation.
-  **Surveillance & Privacy**: Increased use of invasive technologies which give employers unlimited possibilities to remotely monitor and control workers way beyond what is justified.
-  An **extra burden or a push to stay at home for women workers** who often bear the brunt of household chores, having to juggle between work, household and care responsibilities.
-  Teletwork is **not a substitute for leave**, such as maternity, parental, sick, or care leave.
-  A **threat to the collective community of workers** united through their workplaces and trade unions.

Teletwork – a worker’s friend?

Advantages of regulated teletwork

-  **Voluntary Principle**: Workers should have the right to choose to teletwork and to revert to the office.
-  **Happier workers**: Teletwork can lead to higher productivity, reduced absenteeism and greater job satisfaction provided it is not permanent and if presence at the workplace is still possible some days a week.
-  **A better work-life balance**: More flexibility and autonomy can benefit workers, provided it does not result in unpaid overtime, pressure to be flexible and always available, and huge psychological strains.
-  **Employers shoulder their responsibility**: They ensure equipment, pay workers’ health and social insurance, provide extra allowance for workers’ costs of teletworking (utilities, etc.), training, etc.
-  If **workers’ rights to form and join a union, as well as to collective bargaining** are guaranteed.
-  **Trade union representatives are involved in establishing teletwork regulatory frameworks** and provided with the necessary facilities and digital tools to defend workers on an equal footing with employers.



IndustriAll Europe's demands

for ensuring that telework benefits workers:

- ! **Telework must be regulated** through national regulation and/or collective agreements at all levels, especially where regulatory frameworks have not yet been established and where unions see it as necessary.
- ! The **voluntary principle must be fully respected**. Workers should have the right to choose between teleworking or working at the office. Telework and office work must be compatible.
- ! **Working time** needs to be in full compliance with national regulation and/or collective agreements. Working time conditions must be the same no matter where the work is carried out.
- ! The **right to disconnect** must be fully granted and respected.
- ! The **employer is fully responsible** for workers, providing good quality equipment, proper health and safety measures, health and social insurances, necessary training. An additional allowance to cover workers' expenses for teleworking must be paid (utilities, such as heating and electricity, etc.).
- ! **Teleworkers enjoy the same rights as all other workers**, including the right to form and to join a union, collective bargaining, training, promotions and bonuses, etc.
- ! **The employer must respect the privacy and autonomy of the teleworker**: limiting the collection of data to only what is necessary; a clear protection of worker's personal data in line with GDPR; full transparency of the scope and use of data collected and respect of the demand to keep humans in control.
- ! **Trade union representatives must be involved** in all the points outlined above and provided with the necessary facilities and digital tools to defend workers on an equal footing with employers.



Want to learn more?

Our detailed demands on telework are laid out in our position paper:

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