



Joint ETUC & European trade union federations statement for Workers Memorial Day 2020

The COVID-19 outbreak has shown us how vulnerable we are to an epidemic, and how devastating the effects can be: on life, on health, on society, on our economy.

It has demonstrated very clearly the importance of protecting working people (and all people) from disease, especially at the workplace.

It has also shown the importance of investing in good public health care, investing in good conditions for health care workers and other frontline workers, and the need to ensure good sick pay and other provisions to protect the wages and jobs of all.

For International Workers Memorial Day – 28 April – we commemorate all those who died from corona virus. We remember health care workers and all other workers who died from corona virus through exposure at work. No one should die from work!

Nurses, paramedics, other medical staff, and others who work in health care premises, including cleaners, are exposed to multiple occupational risks – biological (e.g. from viruses), chemical (e.g. from the many carcinogenic substances used in a medical setting), physical (e.g. from machinery noise, radiation, slips and falls) and ergonomic risks (e.g. from heavy lifting), psychological (e.g. from the intensity and emotion of the work and from shift work) and hazardous drugs.

Many other workers are also very exposed to disease. For example, care workers, rubbish collectors, teaching staff, transport, shop, construction, contact centre and fast-food workers as well as couriers and delivery workers are among those with high exposure to disease. Many of these workers also work physically close to others: risking to spread as well as catch diseases. Some posted and precarious workers live and travel in close proximity to fellow workers. Many are also in precarious working conditions, low-paid and unable to take sick leave – either because they are not entitled to sick pay, or because they cannot afford to: putting themselves and others at risk if forced to work when ill.

It is essential that all existing health and safety laws and agreements for these workers, and indeed all workers, are fully and properly implemented, involving social partners. It is also essential to review whether existing protections are adequate for dealing with risks such as corona virus. It is clear that many workers, including health care workers, did not for example have adequate personal protective equipment. Investment in health and safety equipment and workplace dialogue and debate about implementing health and safety measures need to be scaled up.

Health care services have been stretched to the absolute limit by corona virus. Public health services' ability to tackle the coronavirus crisis has not been helped by staff shortages, and inadequate facilities and budgets. The OECD emphasised the importance of public health spending and investment in its recent report on responses to the virus. Trade unions call for increased investment in public health care, not just during the crisis but also afterwards to strengthen our health services ability to deal with this and other emergencies.

The coronavirus crisis has resulted in temporary measures to extend sick pay and income protection schemes to workers who do not normally have the right to sick pay and other protections, including self-employed and platform workers. This shows that there is a longer-term problem which needs to be fixed: all workers should have sick pay, unemployment benefits and other wage protection benefits. And adequate protections for their health and safety in the working life.