

Belgium: Sectoral agreement finally reached in the metal sector

After very tough negotiations, the Belgian social partners in the metal sector finally reached an agreement which covers 185,000 workers and which puts the health of workers first.

At the end of April, the Belgian social partners at interprofessional level agreed on a [generic guide](#) which set the framework that governs the restart of the activity in non-essential sectors. The guide was developed by unions and employers as a compromise which was meant to serve as the basis for the more specific tailor-made agreements that result from the sectoral negotiations. Trade unions have been strongly demanding that the implementation of this guide should take place with the involvement of the appropriate workers' representative bodies.

In the metal sector, negotiations have initially failed, because the employers refused to allow the Committee for Prevention and Protection at Work (CPPT) to fulfill its role and take the final decision on measures of health and safety at work, especially where the social distance cannot be respected. The Belgian unions refused to compromise at the expense of workers' health and safety. In times of global pandemic, with the number of deaths rising continuously, it is outrageous that some employers try to put profit over workers' health.

Fortunately, the unions won the fight and the social partners reached an agreement which does not compromise on the health and safety of workers. The new agreement ensures the involvement of the CPPT in consultations on the measures taken in cases where social distance is not possible. In the absence of a consensus, the Inspectorate will be called. This sectoral agreement is the sectoral supplement to the [generic guide](#) agreed at interprofessional level and includes the following main points:

- Workers who are most at risk (i.e. due to medical pre-conditions like cancer or respiratory problems) can ask to not resume work, after acquiring a medical certificate.
- A worker who considers that the minimum safety measures are not being complied with at the workplace or at a customer's premises, has the right to temporarily suspend the work and inform their employer without the risk of sanction.
- Regarding the end-of-year bonus, for workers whose collective agreement does not provide for at least 65 days of temporary unemployment for reasons of force majeure, a supplement of EUR 7.5 is provided for each day of temporary unemployment due to COVID-19, up to a maximum of 65 days, with company supplements on top of the sectoral EUR 12.07 being deducted. This supplement of EUR 7,5 does not apply to enterprises with their own end-of-year bonus scheme.
- Regarding the sectoral supplementary pension plan, the payment into the fund will continue also in the event of temporary unemployment due to a force majeure like COVID-19.

The Belgian unions are pleased that the social dialogue has been resumed in a constructive manner and that a sectoral collective agreement in which workers' health is the absolute priority was reached. Once again, it becomes clear that sector level negotiations are crucial to ensure that workers' rights are respected and that employers do not circumvent the adequate protection standards.

Successful negotiations have also been concluded in the following sectors: electrotechnics; (wholesale) distribution of electrotechnical equipment; metal and mobility, distribution, repair and maintenance; textile; recovery.

The unions will continue their work by implementing this sectoral agreement at the company level.