

## Policy brief

# Good quality jobs: A compass for the next legislative period

## IndustriAll Europe's take

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### OVERVIEW

Good quality jobs should be considered as a fundamental element in every social and economic policy in the EU.

At the heart of the European social model, initiated by Jacques Delors through the Val Duchesse social dialogue in 1985, lay a commitment to foster equitable working conditions and high-quality employment opportunities across our continent. However, the period of globalisation and deregulation at the turn of the century, compounded by the economic downturn of 2008, the subsequent imposition of austerity measures, and the erosion of collective bargaining, led to a shift in the EU's priorities. Rather than prioritising innovation, quality and research, the focus shifted towards unfair competition in wages and the proliferation of substandard working conditions.

Faced with shortages of workers across many sectors, compounded by the impact of twin transitions and the challenge of demographic change, the COVID-19 pandemic dealt a final blow to the prevailing low-cost, low-quality jobs model. Today, the attractiveness of a job hinges on the working conditions employers can provide. Indeed, a recent study by the [ETUC](#) reveals that industries experiencing the most severe labour shortages pay, on average, 9% less than sectors with more readily available recruitment.

These disruptions underscore the urgent need to prioritise the concept of quality jobs as a fundamental element of every social and economic policy. It is crucial to raise awareness about their multifaceted impact at various levels: on individual workers, on companies, and on society as a whole. Poor-quality jobs exact a toll on both individuals and societies, as they can compromise health and well-being, perpetuate in-work poverty, exacerbate child poverty, reinforce gender inequalities in the labour market and beyond, and restrict job and social mobility.

- **For workers**, good quality jobs matter as they aim to ensure their physical and psychological integrity at work, construct their life trajectories, and support their families. Workers also aim to be heard in their workplaces and communities, exercising control over their lives.
- **For companies and organisations**, good quality jobs matter to ensure access to workers: to reduce labour shortages, have a well-trained workforce in an era of constant change, and build community acceptance. Promoting a healthy workplace is a means to ensure a healthy workforce,

to retain employees, organise workloads productively, decrease the rate of absenteeism, and ensure employees' adherence to organisational goals.

- **For societies**, good quality jobs matter as they enable equality, contribute to relative prosperity through value creation, ensure dignity for all through work, and support democratic systems. Additionally, a healthy workplace makes societies more resilient, by ensuring stable, skilled, inclusive and committed citizens, and reducing the risk of isolation, stress and other psycho-social risks.

At the EU level, the discourse on quality jobs has significantly influenced policymaking across a broad spectrum of initiatives. Firstly, the European Pillar of Social Rights outlines a pathway for improving job quality by promoting education, training, secure and adaptable employment, social dialogue, work-life balance, a healthy and safe work environment, and data utilisation, among other factors. However, several challenges, including a lack of political will, resistance from businesses, and implementation difficulties at various levels, impede its realisation.

Furthermore, the recently signed [La Hulpe Declaration](#) on April 16, 2024 (not endorsed by Business Europe), aims to reinvigorate the EU's social dimension. The ETUC has been unequivocal: the EU must combat the proliferation of precarious work, uphold the right to disconnect, and bolster collective bargaining. Letta's Report (2024) also aligns with these goals. It emphasises that our competitiveness should not rely solely on cost-cutting measures. Instead, Letta advocates for a fifth EU freedom: research and innovation. Additionally, Letta proposes a "right to stay" initiative to promote high-quality jobs in Eastern and Southern European countries, thus preventing an irreversible brain drain.

Finally, industriAll Europe's involvement in the Antwerp Declaration on February 20, 2024, underscores the call for substantial investments in the Green Transition and the promotion of quality employment opportunities in our continent. The second point of the declaration focuses on establishing a Clean Tech Deployment Fund for Energy Intensive Industries, in conjunction with a State Aid Framework, to safeguard and generate quality jobs in Europe. Notably, the European Commission, in its new action plan to tackle labour and skills shortages, acknowledges the pivotal role of quality jobs in reducing vacancy rates and enhancing employability for the first time.

Considering the risk of making "quality jobs" an empty expression, given the threat of the rise of the far right in the EU elections and its role in the new Commission, **defining what indeed constitutes a good quality job** is of special concern to industriAll Europe's agenda: **to prevent deindustrialisation and ensure a fair and just twin transition with good working conditions guaranteed through collective agreements at all relevant levels.**

## WHAT IS A GOOD QUALITY JOB?

Efforts to enhance job quality face limitations due to the absence of a consensus on measurement methodologies. Various institutions employ distinct approaches and datasets to gauge different facets of employment. The International Labour Organization (ILO) introduced the Decent Work Agenda in 2008, urging countries worldwide to conduct working condition surveys to gather comparable data on job quality, which is crucial for identifying policy priorities. While the [OECD](#) (through its database [Institutional Characteristics of Trade Unions, Wage Setting, State Intervention and Social Pacts](#)) and the European Commission (based on the [European Working Conditions Survey](#) of Eurofound and the [EU labour force survey](#) of Eurostat) encourage Member States to foster high-quality employment, they propose divergent

measurement frameworks. Additionally, the European Trade Union Institute has devised the [European Job Quality Index \(JQI\)](#), with a Member State approach, taking into account both EU and OECD databases.

Acknowledging these complexities, **industriALL Europe supports the development and validation of a standardised European measure of job quality**, along with a comprehensive dataset. **The idea is to create a framework of minimum standards across work and employment to provide a solid floor, below which no one should fall.**

Following the methodology of the Warwick Institute for Employment Research (IER), which has tested a holistic and comprehensive standardised measure for job quality, seven key dimensions are especially relevant for measuring the status of a job position. The dimensions were obtained through the work made by the team led by Professor Chris Warhust, who extracted data from 75 studies over a 20-year period on job quality (see table below).

### DIMENSIONS OF A STANDARD MEASURE OF JOB QUALITY



The standard for each of the seven dimensions will need to be established based on workers’ needs and bearing in mind that it is easier to discern what makes a bad job than a good job. These minimum standards should be negotiated and guaranteed through collective agreements, especially at the cross-sectoral and sectoral levels, and/or through legal frameworks where trade unions request it to avoid the problems of voluntarism and guidelines. **The minima in the seven dimensions must also be subject to scrutiny, a periodic assessment when requested by the social partners, but at least every five years may be the solution.** Moreover, these minima must not prevent employers offering, or unions negotiating, higher standards.

The data could be collected by instruments that are already created, such as the European Working Conditions Survey (which covers most of the dimensions) and the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC). However, to provide consistency in analysing, monitoring, evaluating job quality and supporting EU policy development, both surveys would need to run every two years (not every four, as happens now), and increase the sample size, as currently this is too small.

## DOUBLE TRANSITION, DOUBLE DISRUPTION AND AN AGEING POPULATION

### THREATS.

Digitalisation is rapidly advancing across our continent, impacting labour markets and job conditions, resulting in significant structural shifts. Certain job profiles are fading away, while new ones emerge, sparking fresh social policy discussions on training, organisation of work, health and safety, and working time. The influence of digitalisation varies across sectors and hinges on regulations, public investments and social contexts.

The push towards digital transition is primarily fuelled by companies aiming for enhanced productivity and a competitive edge. AI and digitalisation do not automatically lead to good or bad jobs. The outcome depends rather on how AI and new technologies are shaped at all levels: from the legal framework to a tailor-made approach through social dialogue and collective bargaining. Those new technologies introduce novel methodologies for measuring, standardising, and quantifying labour. This is usually translated into more control and surveillance, undermining all the aforementioned quality indicators.

Manufacturing is also suffering to some extent from the platformisation of work, as workers are being subject to a lack of control relating to time, autonomy, and are digitally supervised. This phenomenon is taking place especially in Central-Eastern and Southern European countries. Moreover, a recent [study](#) from the OECD reveals that workers in the manufacturing sectors are experiencing increased intensity and stress as a result of the faster pace of work dictated by AI, and are increasingly concerned about the privacy of their data. AI is also associated with the *deskilling* of workers, especially those with medium qualifications, creating a dangerous polarisation between high-skilled and low-skilled workers. De-skilling in certain occupations is another example: In repair shops, cars were previously repaired by engineers and mechanics. Now, with the advent of electronic cars, much of the repair work involves software, reducing the need for traditional mechanical skills.

The ongoing job restructuring entails a meticulous analysis of each unit of paid working time, enabling companies to phase out activities with lower added value, individualisation of employment relationships, and rise of service contracts with freelancers. This fails to guarantee working hours, payment, training, leave and democracy at the workplace. In fact, the [ETUI study on job quality and digitalisation](#) confirmed that the effects of computerised systems on work include more unpredictable, intense work rhythms, longer working hours and poorer work-life balance.

The Green Transition also redirects workers from heavily unionised and socially protected sectors to those with lesser conditions. For example, coal miners often encounter reduced conditions or different collective agreements when transitioning jobs. There have been reported cases where mine workers, while dismantling mines, discovered that their employment status had been downgraded. This occurred because their collective agreements were changed to align with construction sector conditions. The training programmes offered to these workers do not always aim to improve their working conditions. For example, in Germany, a coal miner may earn an average of €50,000 per year, whereas electricians or plumbers may not reach that income level. Job-to-job transitions in the circular economy, such as those in recycling or waste management, do not necessarily come with improved working conditions.

Disruptive changes in supply chains also endanger workers' existing skills unless proper re-training schemes are implemented. Some industries may tie new investments to hiring third-party nationals or agency workers, resulting in downgraded working conditions. Labour migration must not lead to exploitation. Unfortunately, the opposite is happening due to the inadequate EU legal framework which does not ensure equal treatment of migrant workers. This is the case, for instance, of Hungary and its battery sector, where the foreign workforce is being tied to the new projects. More serious still, Hungarians trade unions report that most Hungarians refuse to work in those new battery plants due to high health and safety risks from exposure to chemicals. As third-country nationals have very limited rights, Hungarian trade unions face huge hurdles in defending them, as they do not have the right to collectively represent workers from abroad, but only to help them individually.

As part of the same frame, another problem is the long chain of subcontractors. Although in theory every worker must be informed/trained about the hazards at their workstation, this tends to be less and less observed further down the line of subcontracting (language problems, unawareness of the “employer”). Personal protective equipment may be unsuitable, not the right size, or simply not provided. Similar cases have been reported in Belgium, like the infamous example of [Borealis](#). This is a perfect example of an abusive subcontractive maze: 174 workers, mostly from Bangladesh, were working as subcontractors for €3.50/hour, after already having paid €9,000 for their journey to come to work in Belgium. The workers' journey, organised by an Italian subcontractor, took them from Bangladesh to Hungary, Portugal and Belgium. After the inspection services' findings at Borealis, the victims were simply diverted by intermediaries to BASF, where fraudulent practices were also discovered. The court recognised the workers as victims of human trafficking.

To sum up, third-country nationals who arrive in the EU seeking a better life often end up facing exploitation through very low pay and very difficult working conditions, including exhausting working hours, exposure to chemical substances, and continuous threats related to their permits (their permits being often tied to an abusive employer trapping them). A clear ban on excessive subcontracting and intermediaries (maximum one level, or more under exceptional circumstances), as well as an increase in inspections and trade union involvement, are urgently needed to end exploitation and abuse. Even in less dramatic cases than that of Borealis, trade unions report employers' misuse of such practices for the sole purpose of reducing labour costs and increasing profits.

Unfair competition also has an impact on the certainty of workers and the quality of their jobs. The automotive sector in France, Germany and the Czech Republic, and other countries in the EU are grappling with the shift from thermal to electric vehicles due to disruptions in the supply chain, exacerbated by competition from substantial investments in China and the US in EVs and batteries. Not only is unfair competition worrying, but also aggressive new business practices, such as those conducted by [Tesla](#), have been eroding workers' rights, attacking collective bargaining, and undermining wages and working conditions.

Worker representation is another crucial element for improving job quality and ensuring the effective functioning of workplace democracy. Current indicators suggest that trade union density remains stable in traditional energy-intensive industries but is declining in sectors related to renewables. This discrepancy

amounts to a [5-percentage-point](#) difference between the two. Additionally, workers in traditional sectors are, on average, 13 percentage points more likely than others (64% vs. 51%) to have access to a worker representative.

The quality of a job depends as much on health and safety- both physical and psychological- as on salary and working conditions. The green and digital transitions introduce new risks, including exposure to hazardous substances, new technologies and processes, and changes in work organisation. Workers face massive information overload and constant worry about climate change impacts, leading to **eco-anxiety**. Additionally, increased workplace automation can result in workers being isolated at their workstations for longer periods. This isolation can cause accidents to go unnoticed for longer durations and increase psycho-social risks, such as depression, anxiety and cognitive decline.

Finally, in the era of digitalisation, surveillance and big data, quality jobs should be jobs open to everyone, with fair conditions (recruitment, remuneration, promotion), regardless of gender, race, sexual orientation, health or age. Evaluations should not be automatised and governed by abstract algorithms. Employers should strive to keep the workplace free of harassment and violence, not only offline but also offline.

### **OPPORTUNITIES.**

Jobs in highly polluting activities currently account for around 5% of total EU employment. It is improbable that all of them will be phased out, as the green transition will still necessitate inputs from sectors such as metal mining and chemical/metal manufacturing. Moreover, it is essential to consider the potential transfer of skills from one sector to another. According to the European Commission's [impact assessment](#), the Green Deal Industrial Policy, in conjunction with the NZIA and the CRMA, may generate the creation of 1.2 million jobs by 2050. Additionally, the Just Transition Mechanism aims to allocate €19.2 billion to regions the most carbon-intensive with the highest number of workers in fossil fuels. Its objective is to facilitate a job-to-job transition and foster favourable conditions for economic diversification and increased access to green investments.

However, both the digital and green transitions also offer opportunities for enhancing job quality. Digital technologies can improve job quality by mitigating risks, reducing hazardous or strenuous tasks, and facilitating the automation of repetitive tasks, enabling workers to reskill and upskill for new roles within companies. They also expand the scope of collective bargaining beyond salaries and working conditions. The need to comply with the new AI Act and the *human-in-command principle* is an opportunity for trade unions to be actively part of the transition. In fact, it has been proved that the involvement and consultation of employees through their unions on the issue has a [positive effect](#). AI should facilitate the task of employees, but at the same time, the productivity gains should be shared with workers, not lead to higher stress or deskilling. Collective bargaining and workers' participation becomes a key tool for ensuring a fair digital transition, and a just use of AI at the workplace.

The high demand for jobs in the green and digital transitions, coupled with a tight labour market, is leading to a re-evaluation of the employer-employee relationship. The necessity to attract and retain workers presents an excellent opportunity to advocate for training programmes within companies. In this regard, industriAll Europe continues to advocate for the individual right to training and calls for significant public and private investments in vocational education and training.

The reduction of certain tasks due to digitalisation and the necessary adaptation of business models pave the way for working time reduction schemes, significantly enhancing work-life balance, and fostering worker development within companies. A notable example is the Lamborghini Case, where thousands of workers enjoy, thanks to their collective agreement, reduced working hours combined with training time.

Meeting the demands of the dual transition requires expertise to anticipate change and prepare both companies and workers for alternatives. Some of these concepts are already being realised. For example, French unions (FO-CFE-CGC, CFTC and CFDT) at Stellantis have negotiated an employment and career management agreement with the company, establishing an Observatory of Skills. IG Metall has also developed a sectoral collective agreement called 'Future Agreements' over the past few years. The goal of the Future Agreements framework is to empower workers to analyse the impact of the crisis, propose ideas for the company's strategic future and economic development at each location, and establish new targets for future products, investments, competitiveness and necessary qualifications. Essentially, it serves as a framework for anticipating change.

There is also an opportunity to enhance workplace democracy. The substantial investments needed to achieve climate goals and facilitate the transition should be jointly overseen by trade unions. Social conditions should be met for any public funding, and job quality and standards should be upheld through public procurement laws. The new amendment of the German Federal public procurement law paves the way towards this direction, ensuring that public contracts at national level are only awarded to companies that apply provisions of collective agreements.

Furthermore, the green transition could imbue thousands of industrial workers, whose jobs have lost their former prestige, with a renewed sense of purpose. It will also foster a stronger sense of community belonging, positioning them as part of the solution. The announced €4.5 billion investment in a carbon dioxide-free steel plant by SSAB in Luleå (Sweden) aligns with this direction, aiming to reduce Sweden's carbon dioxide emissions by 7%. This initiative involves cooperation with local trade unions, the development of workers' skills, and the provision of quality job opportunities.

Finally, salaries are crucial. The European Minimum Wage Directive urges Member States to facilitate conditions for collective bargaining, with the goal of achieving an 80% collective bargaining coverage rate. This legislation comes at a critical juncture of business transformation. The aimed increase in collective agreement coverage is a positive step towards providing more security for workers, negotiated salaries, and greater assurance in reskilling and upskilling programmes. Additionally, new initiatives, such as Michelin's "[decent salary](#)" seems appealing, as the company takes into consideration geographical and family needs when calculating their worker's salary. That said, trade union representatives must be always involved.

## INDUSTRIALL EUROPE'S ASSESSMENT AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A just and sustainable economy is possible, but only if there is a value distribution of the impact between companies and workers. The system is changing quickly, and the EU needs to safeguard quality jobs and

its basic common fundamentals. Good quality jobs are better for workers, companies, and the society. IndustriAll Europe recommends:

#### Demands for policymakers:

- Establish a unit working collectively with different DGs of the European Commission in order to advocate, support and report on improvements in job quality, which should include a research-to-policy expert advisory group. This unit should establish minimum standards for job quality, taking into consideration the involvement of the social partners; some already exist, others need to be developed.
- Establish Member State enforcement agencies, with initial emphasis on labour compliance, enhance the authority of the European Labour Authority to conduct investigations and levy fines.
- Encourage Eurofound to develop a larger dataset to enable analyses at regional, industry and different demographic levels. Additionally, encourage Eurofound to have a targeted focus on what works, i.e. lever the 'improvement', not just report on job quality.
- Through research councils, encourage training and the use of action researchers at universities and training centres to support workplace change – part of the 'engagement and impact' agenda for universities.
- Encourage teaching of job quality in EU business schools – the next generation of business leaders/managers won't implement change if they are not aware of its benefits.

#### Demands for employers:

- Promote discussions on quality jobs within the framework of the Just Transition, proactively anticipating change and establishing observatories at both the company and sector level.
- Raise awareness at the management and shareholders' level of the spillover effects of bad quality jobs in the company, in the country's economy and in society.
- Engage in collective bargaining to deliver good quality jobs, recognising that collective bargaining is a key tool in ensuring fair conditions and trade-offs. Collective bargaining is essential as it provides a structured platform for employees to voice their concerns and demands, leading to fairer and more equitable working conditions. By recognising the importance of this process, employers contribute to the creation of high-quality jobs that meet the needs of both the workforce and the organisation.
- Invest in their workforce by providing comprehensive training programmes, continuous professional developments, and lifelong learning opportunities.
- Commit to a fair distribution of profits/wealth created. By adopting a fair distribution approach, companies can foster trust, loyalty, and a sense of shared purpose among their stakeholders, employees and the communities where they are established.
- Engage in periodical discussions with trade unions on health and safety issues: risk assessment, mitigation measures, evaluation of accidents, and especially psycho-social risks (PSR).
- Commit to an avoidance of evaluations based on automatisations or algorithm management, ensuring a fair access to everyone regardless of gender, race, sexual orientation, health or age.
- Engage with trade unions in the drafting of more legislation on OSH and PSR at European and national level.



### Demands for trade unions:

The establishment of an indicator for quality jobs at EU level could refocus trade unions' agendas and serve as a tool for empowerment:

- **The indicator may be a reference scale for improving working conditions.** Trade union representatives at company or sector level may identify which of the seven dimensions need improvement. Therefore, workers' leaders can focus on those issues and promote measures to tackle them.
- **The indicator may be a tool for advocating for good quality training.** Ensuring good quality jobs during the transition period requires cost-free training that takes place during working hours and includes recognition schemes. Life-long learning is fundamental for a job-to-job transition.
- **The indicator may be a tool for advocating for social conditionalities tied to public funding.** Lobbying national or regional governments to include references to quality jobs and social dialogue in their tendering processes is crucial. A standard indicator of quality jobs could serve as the minimum requirement to access the tendering process. Trade unions could also use this standard to unlock Just Transition (JT) funds through regional JT Observatories.
- **The indicator as a tool for gathering data and mapping the scale of different job position within a company and between companies.** Relevance for overseeing good working conditions for all workers, including migrants, outsourced, and freelance workforce. A system of certification for good quality jobs could be launched, potentially including a ranking system. Companies with this certification would find it easier to access the tendering process and would receive more support from trade unions.