



European Federation
of Building
and Woodworkers



28 April – Workers Memorial Day

HEALTH AND SAFETY IS YOUR RIGHT!

With 1 in 3 people working from home, and those at the workplace taking special precautions, COVID-19 shows the life and death importance of health and safety at work.

Among the 530,000 deaths from COVID-19 in the European Union* are uncounted thousands of workers who got it at work. We mourn their loss and offer condolences and solidarity to loved ones. We also remember those who died in the last year from work-related cancer and other illness and accidents at work: over 100,000 in Europe alone.

While vaccination offers hope, health and safety must remain an absolute priority in the coming months and beyond. Health and safety are not gifts from the authorities or a good employer: health and safety at work is YOUR right. A right that unions fight for!

In the European Union 'Every worker has the right to working conditions which respect his or her health, safety and dignity'^{**}. EU law^{***}

- obliges employers to provide healthy and safe workplaces,
- requires all workers to be protected by health and safety law, and
- gives workers the right to information and consultation on health and safety, and to designate safety representatives.

It means employers are responsible for obvious risks such as exposure to dangerous substances, heavy lifting or repetitive movements, as well as other less widely acknowledged risks such as work-related stress, harassment and bullying.

Despite clear rights, health and safety is far from a reality for all workers. One in three workers in Bulgarian, Slovakia and Spain and almost half in Czechia and Greece who must wear personal protective equipment (PPE) at work are only provided it sometimes or not at all. During the COVID crisis many essential workers, among which women are overrepresented in the care and cleaning sectors, have not had adequate PPE. The same applies to precarious workers, whose limited social protection gives them no choice but to continue working, even if they have coronavirus symptoms.

Many workers have not been able to socially distance. Homeworking carries its own risks like increased domestic violence (up by a third in some EU countries during lockdown), longer hours unable to disconnect, and a lack of appropriate equipment at home. The growth of workers in digital platforms leaves increasing numbers of workers without proper protective equipment – only 35% of platform workers say their platform had taken measures to assist them in the pandemic.

Trade unions and safety representatives play a vital role in ensuring health and safety. Any working person who cares about their own health and safety at work should join a union and find out if they have a safety representative. A trade union can help to ensure that a safety representative is appointed and listened to by management.

Trade unions fight for better health and safety in the workplace and in law. Unions have obtained from the EU occupational exposure limits for many cancer-causing substances and are fighting to get tougher limits and for more substances. Unions are seeking stronger legal obligations on employers to tackle stress and back pain (and other so-called musculo-skeletal disorders). Unions are also pushing for the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to implement its centennial conference decision in 2019 to make occupational safety and health a fundamental right at work.

Health and safety are not just for Workers Memorial Day or even the pandemic – it's your right and for life – literally!

*As of 25 February 2021

**Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, art. 31

***Occupational Health and Safety Framework Directive, 1989