

Brussels, 24 March 2020

**Sent by e-mail****For the attention of:*****Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission******Nicolas Schmit, Commissioner for Jobs and Social rights******Janusz Wojciechowski, Commissioner for Agriculture******Stella Kyriakides, Commissioner for Health and Food Safety******Ylva Johansson, Commissioner for Home Affairs*****Subject:** COVID-19 Outbreak, workers in agriculture and food production deserve better protection

Dear Madam President, Dear Commissioners,

First of all, I would like to thank you for your leadership during these turbulent times.

As a Trade Union organization representing workers along the food chain, EFFAT expresses its deepest concern for the conditions of millions of workers employed in agriculture and food production that today are multiplying their efforts to make sure food is available for everyone during this emergency. Although we are all benefiting from their tireless and indispensable work, the measures taken to protect their health are often too weak or even totally absent.

It is unfortunately well known that agricultural workers are often victims of difficult and precarious working and employment conditions across Europe. In some regions, thousands of migrant workers live segregated in deplorable housing; rudimentary shelters built in isolated and overcrowded slums without water, electricity and toilets. **EFFAT is deeply concerned about the considerable risk of those informal settlements becoming hotspots for the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of which would be devastating and likely trigger an unmanageable health emergency for entire regions. We call on you to act promptly to do whatever it takes to eliminate this risk.**

Amid the misery of those shantytowns, the daily life of migrant workers is unchanged despite the precautionary measures established by public authorities; no information about the risks associated with COVID-19 is available, while observing minimum social distancing guidelines is simply impossible. Their condition of poverty and marginalization makes migrant workers even more vulnerable to the effects of this global pandemic. EFFAT's longstanding demand to ensure proper housing for migrant workers employed in agriculture now needs to be taken on board as a matter of urgency. In addition, all agricultural workers in Europe need precautionary equipment to continue operating in full safety. They cannot wait any longer.

In the food processing sector, evidence shows that many companies have not implemented precautionary protocols, sometimes even in defiance of measures adopted by national authorities. This is generating insecurity, stress and often panic among workers, on top of the widespread fears over losing their jobs as a knock-on consequence of the HORECA shutdowns in several countries.

What is more, travel restrictions imposed within Europe and from third countries to Europe as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic are also creating labour shortages in the agriculture sector. The harvesting of many crops is at risk, from the strawberry picking season in the Spanish province of Huelva to the harvesting of tomatoes in Apulia or asparagus in Flanders. Those harvests involve a large number of

seasonal workers from the European Union (Romanians, Bulgarians, Poles, etc.) as well as workers from North Africa and sub-Saharan countries. If the situation continues, the food supply of many products will be at risk. The best way to overcome this challenge is to make the agriculture sector more attractive, with decent wages, proper housing and good working conditions.

In order to deal with these urgent issues, we call on your support and your quick intervention to achieve the following objectives:

**1. To be able to work in safety during this pandemic, all agricultural workers in Europe should benefit from decent housing conditions.** This is extremely urgent if we want to avoid health emergencies in certain European regions. Employers should be considered liable to ensure the provision of such conditions also where third parties are contracted in to provide accommodation. To militate against the spread of the virus, the creation and/or improvement of proper sanitary conditions during field work is also necessary, including the provision of mobile toilets and protective equipment.

**2. The EU should provide guidance to ensure harmonized protocols for the health protection of workers in agriculture and food production.** All workers must be well informed about and protected against the risks connected with the virus. The establishment of centralized purchasing systems to buy protective equipment (e.g. masks and gloves) should be accelerated to avoid unfair competition. We also call on the Commission to increase the pressure **to ratify ILO Convention 184** (Safety and Health in Agriculture) on those Member States that have not yet done so.

**3. The agriculture sector must urgently become more attractive.** The best way to do this is to ensure that agriculture workers enjoy decent salaries and good working conditions everywhere in Europe. The EU can play an important role in achieving this goal, making sure that direct Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) payments are conditional on respect for labour regulations, social standards and collective labour agreements.

**4. At a time when informal settlements such as slums and shantytowns are a serious potential health hazard and the agriculture sector in Europe is facing labour shortages, the need to regularize undocumented migrants is now crucial, especially in some Member States.** This would allow migrants to access care and legal employment without suffering from discrimination or exploitation. Regularization, however, must not be used as an opportunity to provide cheap labour. On the contrary, it should be a way to ensure full equal treatment, protecting migrants from becoming the victims of gangmaster practices, undeclared work and exploitation. At the same time, **we demand that the EU accelerate the revision process of EU asylum rules, ensuring the right to work for asylum seekers no later than 3 months after lodging their application.**

**5. We call on the EU Institutions and national governments to mobilise all unused structural funds to support Member States in ensuring financial and income support for all workers, including non-standard workers in agriculture and the food processing industry affected by unemployment or suspension from work. We also demand access to the European Globalization Fund (EGF) be extended in connection with company closures in the food processing sector – covering also closures which are not strictly related to globalization but to temporary lack of raw materials or temporary export market decline. In addition, EFFAT supports the proposal to launch “EU Covid bonds” as a means of tackling the risk of recession.**

We thank you in advance for your consideration to this letter, and we remain at your disposal for further discussion of the issues and solutions raised.

Your sincerely,

Kristjan Bragason



EFFAT General Secretary