

An ETUC resolution on actions for combatting stress and eliminating psychosocial risks in the workplace: putting an EU Directive on the agenda

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Stress is a serious workplace issue

One quarter of Europeans experience stress from work¹. Stress is experienced when the demands from the work environment exceed the workers ability to achieve them or control them. Job insecurity throughout the economy (including increases in temporary and zero-hours contracts), plus increasing hours of work and workloads, excessive monitoring, accountability, performance management, target setting, badly-managed change and bullying management are all identified as causal factors. In both the private and public sector, jobs that involve working with the public have seen an increase in the emotional content of labour and in both sectors workers report an increase in harassment, violence and aggression all of which add more stress to workers. Overwork is also linked to stress, and increasingly invades more and more of workers personal lives leading more workers to report symptoms associated with burnout. Stress causes profound damage to the lives of workers and their families and can also be very expensive for business and for wider society (e.g. absentee rates and health care expenditure).

A wide range of working condition factors can affect the mental health of workers. Psychosocial risks (PSR) are risks that comes from the way work is organised and from the social interaction at the workplace - between management and workers; and between workers. It is also about the content of the work, the demands placed on the worker and the control the worker has over his/her own work and work situation. Change at the work place, job insecurity and the way work affects the worker's private life are also important components of PSR. In addition, leadership, working time and technical factors have an influence².

Neoliberal economics and austerity policies are also playing a role, they have resulted in the transfer of risk from employers onto the shoulders of workers. This risk transfer inevitably entails a great deal of stress for those workers now subject to economic and financial pressures while potentially not knowing how many hours they will be working from week to week or how they will cope should they fall sick, have an accident or lose their job. Workers therefore suffer a lot of pressure to achieve organisational goals working "anytime, anyplace, anywhere". Greater work load and time pressure on the shoulders of many workers is also common and this threatens the work task being completed to a decent quality all adding to the build-up of stress among the workforce.

The aim of trade union strategies in relation to PSR is to make proposals and to set clear demands on how workplaces and the organisation of work can be adapted so as to prevent and reduce the risk that is placed on workers. The prevention of PSR must be both distinguished from, and prioritised over, resilience narratives that become so prominent in recent years with the rise of ideas such as 'mindfulness at work' and so-called 'wellness at work' initiatives. The ETUC opposes employer attempts to focus on blaming the worker or ideas built on the resilience culture. Employers' strategies must be based on the principle that you change the workplace and have a safe organisation of work; not 'toughen up' the worker.

¹ <https://osha.europa.eu/en/tools-and-publications/publications/reports/executive-summary-psycho-social-risks-in-europe-prevalence-and-strategies-for-prevention/view>

² https://www.baua.de/DE/Angebote/Publikationen/Berichte/Psychische-Gesundheit-2.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=5

A Renewed Trade Union Health and Safety Approach to Combatting Stress

There are three central objectives that our trade union strategy will prioritise, firstly, it must strengthen workers and their unions ability to address work related stress, secondly it must strengthen the employers' obligations to do proper risk management, with meaningful action plans negotiated with unions and help from professional occupational health professionals when necessary, thirdly it must ensure that employers' legal obligations in relation to preventing stress and psychosocial risks are properly recognised and enforced including by a dedicated EU Directive and enhancing the role of OSH and labour inspectorates to enforce existing and new standards.

Priority Action 1: Stepping up actions to secure an EU Health and Safety Directive on Psycho Social Risks (PSR)³.

Europe needs a dedicated Directive in the area of PSR in the workplace. The experience of the patchy implementation of the 2004 autonomous framework agreement on work-related stress⁴ has demonstrated the need for legally binding requirements in the wider field of PSR. Importantly, we need to expand the scope and definition, so that the social and relational aspects are included such as the safe organisation of work (eg, limiting the number of pace determinants that a worker is subject to, measuring the work pressure, the time pressure, control/influence, monitoring and surveillance, performance management and change etc) as well as the social aspects (management quality, support from management and peers, harassment and violence, bullying) are properly taken into account along with physical factors such as noise, heat and vibration. The ETUC has previously stated that the Directive should also include, *“for example, a right to disconnect/log-off for workers so that rest and holiday time is not interrupted. In addition, the impact of work organisation and the increase of precarious work needs to be taken into account.”* The ETUI will be asked to identify the priorities that would need to be included in a European Directive to address all current and emerging aspects of PSR, risk prevention and work-related stress. The 1989 framework directive and the 2004 autonomous framework agreement will serve as the basis in order to identify gaps in prevention of PSR as well as subsequent implementation.

Priority Action 2: Raising Awareness and Providing Negotiating Guidance

The ETUC and its affiliates commit to launching a number of dedicated actions on the subject to raise awareness of this critical issue among trade union representatives beyond occupational health and safety (OSH) experts and to build political momentum towards a directive in the medium- to long-term. This includes :

- a) Developing negotiating guidance for preventing PSR at work. This guidance will cover PSR prevention directly as well as how it should wherever possible be integrated into a wider bargaining strategy. PSR prevention is core union business. Guidance will be developed with relevant information about PSR, including the prevention of PSR, to raise awareness and to enable trade unions to integrate this topic into a (wider) political strategy. The guidance will map where there are currently good examples of regulation, collective agreements, worker involvement and risk prevention.

³ <https://www.etuc.org/en/document/etuc-position-results-ex-post-evaluation-osh-acquis>

⁴ http://resourcecentre.etuc.org/linked_files/documents/Framework%20agreement%20on%20work-related%20stress%20EN.pdf

- b) Pursuing a political strategy in relation to PSR prevention. The ETUC will do this together with its affiliates, in particular EUROCADRES who have a major ongoing project to combat stress. In addition. We will use the next European elections to raise awareness for PSR at work and to anchor the demand for a single directive in the election manifestos of the political parties.

- c) Mandating the ETUI to assess regulation and best practice (including collective agreements on PSR) across EU Member States to start compiling a dossier of good (and bad) examples. This will over time form a body of evidence which will be used to build the case with the Commission as well as to produce communications in the campaign as new information comes to light. Here, we already have some good examples, including in Switzerland where measures to prevent PSR are an intrinsic part of collective agreements with definitions and monitoring by trade unions. Provisions on ‘organisational and social working environment”, developed in Sweden go well beyond the boundaries of a traditional risk assessment, covering the basics for PSR crucial aspects: necessary knowledge for managers and supervisors on how to deal with unhealthy workloads and how to handle victimisation (i.e. training requirement); workload being assessed and resources adapted to the demands; that employees know 1) tasks, 2) results to be achieved, 3) work methods, 4) which work to prioritise, and 5) who can support and which authority they have on these five points.