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Building the future of work together

Social dialogue is vital to tackle Covid-19 crisis

By Michael Freytag

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The outbreak and acceleration of the COVID-19 pandemic is severely impacting people, labour markets and economies around the world. The situation is no less critical in the temporary agency work sector with the number of workers being cut down by 50% to 70% across Europe.

Building on a long-standing tradition of social dialogue, the World Employment Confederation-Europe and UNI-Europa, representing EU Sectoral Social Partners for temporary agency work, decided to address this unprecedented challenge together and issued [joint recommendations](#) to both mitigate the immediate impact of the crisis and prepare for the recovery of the labour market and the economy.

The primary, common goal of the sectoral social partners is to protect the health and safety of temporary agency workers, to keep people at work in a safe environment and support businesses through these difficult times. The contribution of temporary work agencies to keeping the labour market fluent and functioning is essential during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the phase of the economic recovery.

A constructive sectoral social dialogue is a vital part of this contribution. Since the outbreak of the crisis, temporary work agencies and trade unions have been active informing workers and companies on the management of health and safety risks and have been in contact with governments to secure equal access to support measures for agency workers (e.g. paid sick leave, short time work).

The joint recommendations build on those actions already undertaken and call on temporary work agencies and user undertakings to ensure adequate health and safety protection equipment and training tailored to COVID-19 specificities. Temporary work agencies should commit to strengthen reallocation of workers from sectors in decline to sectors in urgent need of workers such as healthcare, logistics, education, agriculture & food production and supply. Such practices are already implemented in countries like the Netherlands, Ireland, the United Kingdom and Belgium.

The recommendations also target national policy makers whose role should be to ensure that temporary agency workers are guaranteed access to universal healthcare, maintain their income and have a minimum right to social protection. Short-time working schemes that have been introduced in many European countries and which are now reinforced in the current COVID-19 crisis via the EU “SURE” initiative can be an effective tool to keep people in employment while providing income support.

Once on the path to economic recovery, the temporary agency work will continue to play a key role, providing labour market access and transitions and in improving the skills and employability of workers. The sector can build on its expertise in health and safety to create a safe and quick pathway back to work. As the joint recommendations underline, the sector can also rely on the solutions already put in place by sectoral social partners at national level for skilling and re-skilling in order to ensure that temporary agency workers have access to training/retraining.

The World Employment Confederation-Europe and UNI-Europa call on policy makers to ensure that the sector has access to support programmes and to strengthen the cooperation between public and private employment services. The sectoral social partners also remind that reforms to ensure effective access to skilling and social protection across diverse forms of work must be accelerated.

The COVID-19 pandemic is challenging our industry, our economy, the way we work and our society. We have a unique opportunity to reinvent the ways of working, learning and providing social protection to the benefit of all workers, regardless of their employment contract.

This concept of social innovation is at the heart of a joint project that the World Employment Confederation-Europe and UNI-Europa are currently conducting, and which will be concluded in early 2021. As our strong tradition of social dialogue has shown, it is only in close cooperation and mutual respect that we can ensure that the economic recovery means a return to inclusive growth.

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