



## ETUC resolution on specific demands for a European Directive on the prevention of psychosocial risks at work

Adopted at the Executive Committee meeting of 15-16 October 2024

Workers in Europe are facing a stress at work emergency. Europe's stress and burn out epidemic is becoming worse due to a combination of badly organised work, increasing staff shortages, overwork, the expectation of an always available culture, insecure work and new surveillance practices by employers, violence and harassment, in particular gender-based violence and harassment and high-pressure working practices leading to 'ethical stress'.

Ensuring quality jobs means taking legislative action to tackle stress at work and psychosocial risks as a matter of urgency. ETUC calls for a Directive on the prevention of psychosocial risks at work.

Psychosocial risks (PSR) are a significant source of ill health in the European Union. A recent ETUI study estimates that 8% of the total burden of depression attributable to the exposure to PSR causes premature mortality. The European Commission (EC) should dedicate more resources to make statistics available at the EU level on the percentage of suicides which are linked to work.

Evidence indicates that PSR can cause and/or exacerbate musculoskeletal and cardiovascular diseases, among others, thus further impacting workers' health and safety. PSR can exacerbate substance abuse among workers. They also threaten the sustainability of organisations as inaction on prevention comes with a cost to businesses and public employers, as well as the broader social welfare system. PSR also contribute to increased absenteeism, including long-term absenteeism, and higher staff turnover rates, coupled with reduced productivity and performance. PSR are deeply intertwined with violence, gender-based violence and harassment at work, including online and offline sexual violence and harassment, third-party violence and domestic violence. Overstretched public services and private services also cause a growing number of cases of ethical stress, whereby workers are unable to provide services of the quality they know would be needed. It is key to ensure that employers of public, private and the non-profit sector give all workers the right and the conditions to provide quality services, with specific attention to frontline workers. For these reasons, robust legislation to prevent these challenges would not only benefit workers but also employers.

Despite the broad scope of the Framework Directive on OSH, which covers safety and health in all work aspects, its more than three decades of existence have resulted in no improvement in managing PSRs. Furthermore, the EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2021-2027 acknowledges the prevalence of stress among European workers but lacks binding measures for preventing PSR. Mere voluntary guidance on



psychosocial risks is not sufficient to protect workers from such risks. ETUC has therefore been calling for years on the EC to put forward a Directive to tackle this issue from the point of view of OSH, collective action and work organisation, preventive measures, and employers' responsibilities.

In 2023, there was a significant increase in political interest regarding mental health within the EU. In particular, we commend the efforts of the Belgian Presidency (2024) in advocating for a European Directive on the prevention of PSR. The high-level conference organised in January concluded with statements from the EC, the Belgian government and the European social partners [BUSINESSEUROPE and SGI Europe] in favour of such legislation.

The Executive Committee of ETUC already adopted a resolution in 2018 on "actions for combatting stress and eliminating psychosocial risks in the workplace". The resolution mandated the ETUC to step up actions to secure an EU Health and Safety Directive on PSR and to raise awareness and provide negotiating guidance. Both objectives of the resolution have been accomplished by ETUC, partly through the EndStress.EU platform. This resolution further delves into the specific content that such a Directive should include, as well as honouring the Congress commitment to address PSR, including online harassment and shaming, at work through a European Directive.

A European Directive on work-related PSR should have a gender perspective and take into account the overexposure of women, as well as other vulnerable groups, including young people, racialised persons, and LGBTQ+ individuals, and include:

- A clear definition of what PSR are, emphasising that they are predictable and preventable and work-related (in line with the ILO description and ILO convention No. 190).
- The conditions under which work is carried out have an impact, as does the organisation of the work with unreasonable tasks, unhealthy workload, understaffing, and targets raising emotional exhaustion and creating conditions of ethical stress, the increase in the number of pace determinants of work combined with insufficient support all create PSR.
- It is the employers who are liable for PSR – not managerial staff – as they are the ones who decide on work organisation. Pathologies resulting from exposure to psychosocial risks must be formally recognised as occupational diseases, for which the recommendation (EU) 2022/2337 concerning the European list of occupational diseases should be amended accordingly to recognise psychosocial disorders.
- Reinforcing the obligation for employers to systematically assess (through occupational safety and health risk assessment), and prevent PSR factors at work at its source, including all forms of gender-based violence and harassment, to limit the exposure to the risk for all workers by putting in place preventive measures, including on work organisation, also through the obligation to ensure good working conditions and to set objectives that do not establish excessive pressure on workers and guarantee quality work, taking account of staffing levels.
- A reversal of the burden of proof in favour of the worker should be provided in cases reported by workers regarding exposure to PSR.
- Prohibit, among other detrimental organisational practices, the surveillance and monitoring of actions and performance through digital technology, such as the use of individual productivity measurement tools that foster competition among workers and, above all, ban the publication of worker performance rankings within companies. This latter practice is widely used, particularly in sales-focused businesses, but not only.
- Guarantee the genuine involvement and participation of trade unions, including health and safety representatives, in the conception and implementation of measures and continuous monitoring to prevent work-related PSR, including



online harassment and shaming and all forms of gender-based violence and harassment.

- Obligation for employers to set objectives and indicators to reduce work-related stress in negotiation with trade unions and workers' representatives.
- Implement measures to prevent psychological distress from being perceived as "embarrassment" to ensure it is not concealed or used to discriminate against those experiencing it and guaranteeing no repercussions for employees who raise concerns regarding psychosocial risks in the workplace.
- Access to training to help prevent psychosocial risks at work must be granted to all workers, with managerial staff receiving mandatory specialised training.
- Enforcement procedures and measures to guarantee compliance, including means for a better functioning of the labour inspectorate such as resources and training. The scope of application of this directive should be broader than the Framework Directive and domestic workers must not be excluded from its application.