

ETUC Standardisation Newsletter - Special Edition: International Workers' Memorial Day

Dear colleagues and friends,

Today, 28 April 2025, is International Workers Memorial Day (IWMD). We remember those who have lost their lives or suffered injury due to workplace accidents and illnesses. This year's IWMD looks at the fight against psychosocial risks at work. With this dedicated newsletter edition, we commemorate such workers, and look at the work conducted by the ETUC over the last years to combat psychosocial risks at work, as well as future plans, in connection to standardisation.

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28 April 2025: International Workers' Memorial Day



Fatal accidents at work represent a stark and tragic reality, highlighting the critical importance of workplace safety. These incidents, which result in the loss of human life, can occur across a wide range of industries, though some sectors carry a significantly higher risk. It's important to remember that behind every statistic is the loss of a human life, and a deeply affected family.

Striving for safer workplaces is a continuous effort that requires the commitment of all those involved. Today, on April 28th, we pause to observe International Workers' Memorial Day (IWMD), dedicated to honouring those who have lost their lives or suffered injury due to workplace accidents and illnesses. More than just a day of mourning, it's a powerful call to action, urging us to strengthen safety standards and prevent future tragedies. The ETUC believes that no one should have to die at work.

This year's IWMD looks at the fight against psychosocial risks at work. These are factors in the workplace that can negatively affect workers' psychological and physical well-being. They arise from how work is designed, organised, and managed, as well as from the social context of work. This newsletter looks at the work conducted by the ETUC over the last years to combat psychosocial risks at work, as well as future plans.

The 2024 European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks (ESENER) of EU-OSHA (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work)

shows that two out of the top 10 risk factors at European workplaces are related to psychosocial risks. The report reveals that work-related psychosocial risks, such as dealing with difficult customers, time pressure, long/irregular working hours, poor communication, and job insecurity, have remained stable since 2019. Challenges in addressing these risks include reluctance to discuss them openly, lack of awareness and insufficient specialist support. Additionally, few organisations have procedures in place to handle threats, abuse, or assaults by external persons. These findings underscore that digitalisation is driving the emergence of new psychosocial risks, reshaping work processes, and posing significant mental health challenges for workers.

PSRs present a unique management challenge in the workplace, with 21% of reporting organisations finding them more difficult to manage than other OSH risks. Notably, there are significant country-specific variations, with Nordic countries like Sweden (38%) and Denmark (37%) reporting a higher perceived difficulty. Furthermore, employee participation in designing preventive measures has seen a decline, dropping from 61% in 2019 to 55% in 2024. In the services sector specifically, up to 56% of organisations view dealing with difficult customers, patients or pupils as challenging.

Occupational Stress: A Growing Pandemic Requiring EU Legislative Action



Occupational stress has become a widespread issue, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The significant rise in teleworking and working from home has

impacted musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs). Women workers are particularly affected by psychosocial risks (PSRs) and MSDs, which highlights the need for a gender-sensitive approach in assessing, preventing, and treating these conditions.

In 2019, the European Commission presented the EU Strategic Framework on Occupational Safety and Health. Unfortunately, the EC's approach to PSRs and MSDs lacks ambition. The mere guidance on psychosocial risks proposed by the Strategic Framework is unlikely to adequately protect workers. The Framework addresses mental health from an individual perspective, failing to consider the broader implications of work organisation.

The EC's June 2023 communication on "A comprehensive approach to mental health" also falls short in addressing workplace issues. While tackling psychosocial risks is a key initiative of the communication, we believe this should be legislated and not limited to guidelines and exchange of knowledge. Commissioner Mînzatu has taken on the responsibility of "improving the European approach to occupational health and safety, particularly on mental health at work".

More than half of all working days lost in the EU are caused by work-related stress. The ETUC has therefore been calling for a European Directive on the prevention of psychosocial risks at work for many years. The ETUC believes that the European Commission should propose a Directive to address this issue comprehensively, focusing on OSH, collective action, work organisation, preventive measures, and employers' responsibilities. The ETUC asks for demands that will help workers to combat mental stress such as the right to access training to help prevent psychosocial risks at work, reinforcing the obligation for employers to systematically assess and prevent PSR factors at work at its source. But also the involvement and participation of trade unions, including health and safety representatives, in the conception and implementation of measures and continuous monitoring is key. The platform endstress.eu provides further information on the joint ETUC - Eurocadres initiative to establish specific legislation on this topic.

Wellbeing in the ISO 45000 Series



The concept of wellbeing, a positive state of life shaped by various factors, is now under scrutiny for its potential inclusion in the European and international standard EN ISO 45001:2018 'Occupational health and safety (OHS) management systems — Requirements with guidance for use'. The standard in its current form does not cover wellbeing but is currently undergoing revision. The document provides a framework for organisations to manage risks and improve OHS performance by establishing criteria for a related management system.

Its revision sparks debate: how can a standard effectively address a concept that extends beyond the workplace? While ISO, the International Standardisation Organisation, explores this complex issue, the ETUC stresses that wellbeing measures must not overshadow fundamental OHS obligations. They argue for a focus on job-related wellbeing, like combating workplace harassment and enhancing job autonomy, alongside stringent data protection and voluntary participation. The ETUC's active involvement aims to safeguard worker health and safety during this pivotal revision. ISO is aiming at publishing the standard in 2026.

Another standard that addresses wellbeing and psychosocial risks more specifically is ISO 45003:2021 'Occupational health and safety management — Psychological health and safety at work — Guidelines for managing psychosocial risks'. Published in 2021, this standard provides crucial guidelines for managing psychosocial risks in the workplace. It focuses on psychological health and safety, offering organisations a framework to prevent work-related injuries and

illnesses. It also aims to foster workplace wellbeing. Applicable across all sectors and organisation sizes, ISO 45003:2021 guides the development, implementation, maintenance, and continuous improvement of healthy and safe work environments. The ETUC actively contributed to the development of this standard. We called for the independent assessment of psychosocial risks to also include the consultation of workers and workers' representatives, as well as having a dialogue about psychosocial risks in health & safety committees. We further called to ensure workers at all levels, including temporary workers and atypical workers, contractors, volunteers and other interested parties, are made aware of the psychosocial risks that can impact them.

Stress-Less Workplaces by Design



Our minds are constantly processing information, analysing situations, and making decisions. But what happens when cognitive demands at work become overwhelming? The mental effort required to perform tasks – known as mental workload - can significantly impact both our well-being and performance.

To help those responsible for designing workplaces, ISO has updated the international standard EN ISO 10075-2 "Ergonomic principles related to mental workload – design principles". This revised standard provides guidance on structuring work systems, tasks, equipment, and environments to better account for mental workload. Recognizing the need to address the evolving challenges

of modern work, the update incorporates new social, organizational, and technological factors.

The ETUC played a key role in the revision of the standard, contributing to a more practical, structure-oriented approach that emphasizes social interaction and interactive labour, exemplified by professions like nursing. The updated standard also addresses risks associated with human-machine interaction, promoting greater transparency and safer design in the context of robotics and AI. Refinements were added in the standard to clarify roles within complex work structures, helping to mitigate potential challenges linked to agile working. Finally, it was clearly acknowledged that legal provisions must be considered when organizing working hours.

EN ISO 10075-2 is used in several countries to help prevent psycho-social risks at work, especially in the absence of specific legislation. While the [ETUC's primary objective remains the adoption of dedicated EU legislation](#), our contributions to the standard's revision and update ensure it aligns with the trade union perspective.

Working with Machines



As AI-powered machines become increasingly prevalent in the workplace, the nature of human-machine interaction is fundamentally changing. This evolution brings with it a set of novel psychosocial risks that require careful consideration. The use of AI in machinery blurs the lines between human and machine, creating

a complex interface with significant psychosocial implications. Beyond physical safety, workers now face cognitive and emotional challenges related to AI-driven automation.

To ensure manufacturers meet new safety regulations on AI that as provided by the revised EU Machinery Regulation, existing machinery standards, including the EN 614 series on ergonomic design principles, are undergoing revision. These standards, which guide the design of machinery and worker-machine interactions, are being updated to reflect the increasing complexity of modern machines. The ETUC is actively participating in this revision, prioritising the integration of mental stress considerations (like interruptions and cognitive load) as human-machine interaction intensifies. We are also advocating for the adaptation of the standards to address new requirements related to artificial intelligence and algorithmic management, safeguarding both the physical and mental health of workers.

Human Resource Management and Workplace Wellbeing



Several elements play a key role in promoting the wellbeing of workers, including job security, a safe physical environment, work-life balance, an adequate workload, fair wages, access to social security, and many more.

ISO Technical Committee 260 on Human Resource Management is working on a standard “Workplace Wellbeing - Guidelines for Thriving Workplaces” (ISO/CD 30441). Based on a pre-existing Canadian standard, ISO 30441 is meant to provide guidance for organisations to develop and maintain organisational conditions and practices that support and promote workforce wellbeing.

Defining the content of the standard, however, will not be an easy task; wellbeing is a broad concept extending beyond working time. With the aim of ensuring that the standard truly supports the wellbeing of workers, through the provision of effective guidance that foresees the meaningful engagement of workers and workers’ representatives, the ETUC has joined the ISO working group tasked with developing this new deliverable (ISO/TC 260/WG 15).

While work on this standard has only quite recently begun, the ETUC’s priorities are clear. For outcomes to be relevant, the standard should provide for the meaningful participation of workers’ representatives, including trade unions, in the implementation and improvement of wellbeing programmes at work. Participation in initiatives offered to workers should remain voluntary, and the collection of any information should be conducted by safeguarding personal data and confidentiality. Importantly, organisations should focus on the workplace without entering the private life sphere of workers.

Another important priority for the ETUC, is that wellbeing measures cannot replace organisational health and safety (OHS) measures. Regardless of whether an organisation has wellbeing measures in place - or not, it must still adhere to OSH obligations, including training for employees on health and safety protocols. This also links to other standards produced in ISO, that is, the ISO 45000-series; wellbeing in connection to OSH is addressed in 45003 and is currently under debate in relation to the revision of ISO 45001. The ETUC believes that a clear distinction should be maintained between the work in ISO TC 260, which should not interfere with OSH-related work connected to the ISO 45000 series.

The standard is at early drafting stages. The Working Group will meet in person in May, in Montreal (Canada) to advance work on its content; the ETUC plans on attending such meetings, bringing the workers’ perspective to its development.

Two Decades of ETUI Research on Psychosocial Risks: a Call to Action for Workers' Memorial Day



Article from Dr Sonia NAWROCKA, ETUI Researcher - Health, Safety & Working Conditions

Today, everyone knows at least one person close to them who is struggling with prevalent work-related psychosocial risks. Their impact on workers' health — such as [burnout](#), depression, anxiety, cardiovascular diseases, and musculoskeletal disorders—have become a serious public health issue. Far from isolated cases, these conditions reflect a growing crisis in Europe's modern workplaces.

The data tell a stark story. Nearly [one-third of workers in the EU experience stress, anxiety and depression caused or made worse by their work, and more than a quarter of workers say their mental health has suffered due to work](#) (OSH Pulse, EU-OSHA 2022). [Burnout affects nearly one in five workers, reaching 33% in some countries](#) (EWCS, Eurofound, 2023).

In response to this mounting evidence, the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), in cooperation with the ETUC, is organizing a high-level conference in Brussels on 28 April 2025 to mark International Workers' Memorial Day (IWMD). This year's theme—[“From data to directive: confronting work-related](#)

[psychosocial risks in the EU](#)”—aims to turn years of research into concrete action by urging the European Commission to introduce a directive on the prevention of psychosocial risks (PSR) at work.

A Persistent Gap in Protection

Although work-related psychosocial risks (PSR) have been recognised in EU occupational health and safety strategies for nearly 30 years, they remain largely underregulated domain of occupational health and safety at the EU level. For over two decades, ETUI has led the research and advocacy effort, building a solid evidence base and pushing for political recognition. From its first [call for dedicated research on work-related psychosocial risks in 2006](#) to the annual meetings of the ETUI PSR Expert Network, the institute has worked tirelessly to build momentum and unify trade union voices across Europe.

ETUI’s multiannual projects have consistently shown how mismanaged psychosocial factors—like workload, work intensity, job insecurity, low autonomy, and poor support—are linked to severe physical and mental health issues. More recently, the institute has examined how new forms of work—[teleworking](#), [platform work](#), [work in the metaverse](#)—have created fresh and often more complex PSR. The report from 2024 gave an overview of the [implications of AI in industry 4.0 on workers’ health and safety](#) and called for a human-centred approach when introducing new technologies in the workplace. As new technologies and innovations in the world of work are introduced now on a daily basis and poorly regulated, many workers face heightened risks of social isolation, digital surveillance, cyberbullying, discrimination, and intensified job insecurity. These challenges call for updated, robust EU legislation that ensures all workers—regardless of how, where, or under what terms they work—are equally protected from psychosocial harm.

Disproportionate Impact on Vulnerable Sectors

[A 2021 ETUI research project revealed the devastating effects of PSR in health and long-term care](#) sectors already hollowed out by years of austerity. Despite their frontline efforts during the pandemic, workers (most of whom are women) continue to endure overwhelming workloads, emotional exhaustion, and poor working conditions. The 2023 follow-up found that [women, younger employees, and those with lower education levels are disproportionately affected by poor psychosocial working conditions and mental health outcomes](#). These findings

point to widespread inequalities in exposure and outcomes—inequalities that cannot be addressed without coordinated legislative action.

The Cost of Inaction

One of the conference's central moments will be the presentation of a landmark study by Professors Stavroula Leka and Aditya Jain. Their work has yielded [a comprehensive taxonomy of PSR sources and outcomes, including links to chronic health conditions like cardiovascular disease and musculoskeletal disorders \(MSDs\), burnout, anxiety and depression, as well as organisational effects such as absenteeism, presenteeism, and premature labour market exits.](#)

The event will also mark the official launch of a report from a multiannual project detailing the societal and economic costs of diseases attributable to work-related psychosocial risks. The first part of the study published in 2023, uncovered the [attributable fractions \(AFs\) of depression were all significant in EU28: job strain \(16%\), job insecurity \(9%\), bullying \(9%\), and effort-reward imbalance \(6%\) and the AFs of cardiovascular diseases ranged from 1% to 11%.](#) Furthermore, the estimates showed that in 2015 alone, over 10,000 deaths in the EU were linked to cardiovascular diseases and depression caused by exposure to psychosocial risks at work. The second part of the study published this year finds the economic burden is staggering: [coronary heart disease \(CHD\) related to PSR costs the EU28 an estimated €PPP 11.8–14.2 billion, while the cost of depression ranged from €PPP 44.7 to 103.1 billion.](#) Notably, over 87% of the costs of depression—between €PPP 38.9 and 89.7 billion—were borne by employers, primarily due to sickness absence and absenteeism.

Fragmented National Approaches

[While many EU Member States have introduced national legislation addressing aspects of PSR, there is significant variation in scope and enforcement.](#) The differences between EU Member States can be explained by how much they recognise the problem of psychosocial risks and how many resources they put into dealing with it. [Most countries have some laws covering the mental health side of workplace safety, but none fully address all aspects. This patchwork of rules means that workers across the EU do not get the same level of protection.](#)

Toward a Binding EU Directive

The conclusion from the research is clear: voluntary guidelines and fragmented national policies are no longer enough. A binding EU directive on psychosocial

risks is urgently needed to guarantee every worker's right to a safe and healthy workplace, regardless of sector, contract type, or location.

As we observe International Workers' Memorial Day, this message is more urgent than ever. Preventing PSR is not only an economic or policy issue—it is a matter of dignity, fairness, and fundamental human rights. Workers are not disposable. Their mental health is not optional. The time for action is now.

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