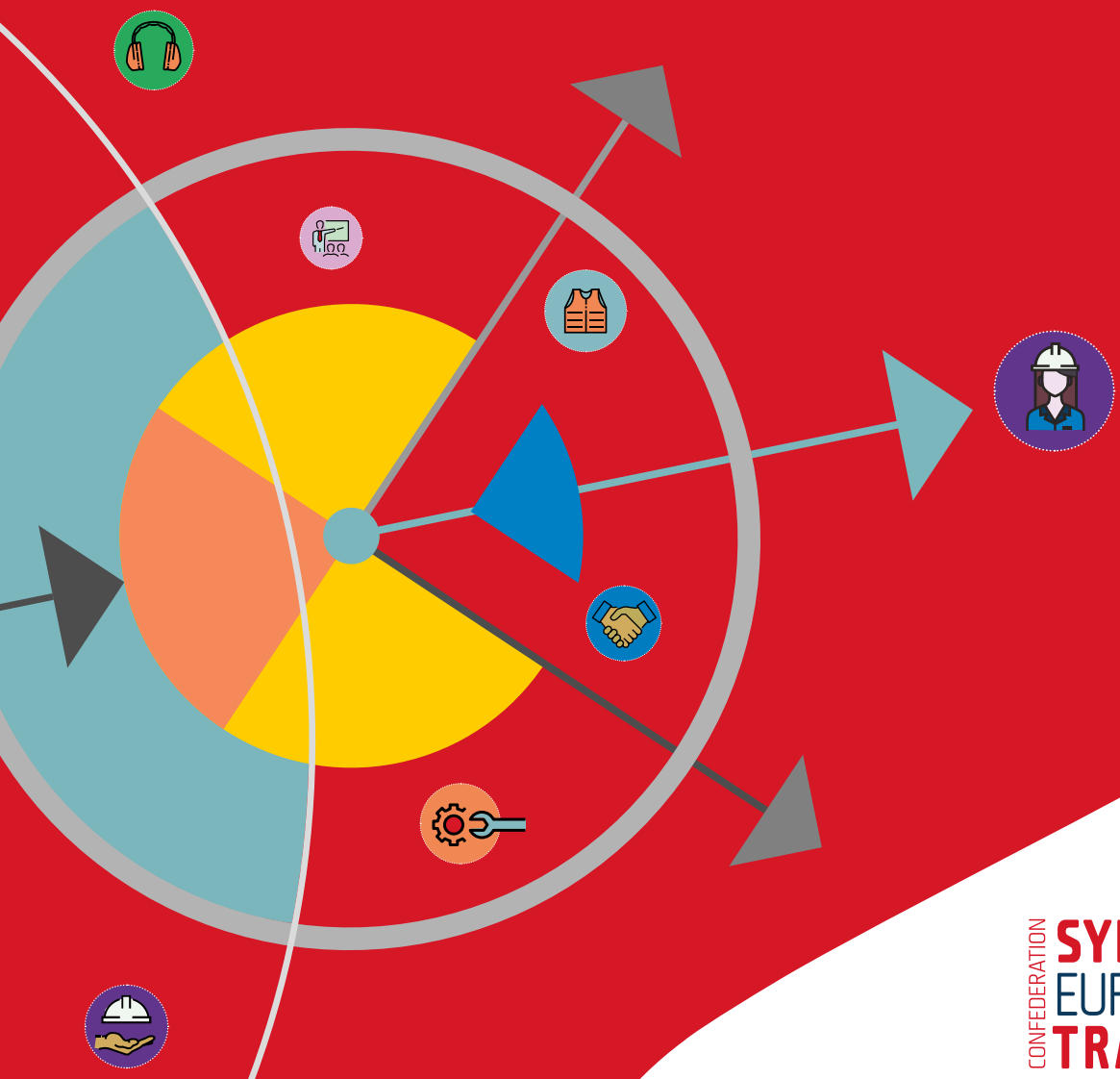
Standards at the workplace:

What they are and why you need to know about them



CONFEDERATION SYNDICAT EUROPEÆN TRADE UNION

Publisher

The **European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)** speaks with a single voice on behalf of European workers to have a stronger say in EU decision-making. It represents millions of members from 94 trade union organisations in 42 European countries, plus 10 European Trade Union Federations. The ETUC aims to ensure that the EU is not just a single market for goods and services, but is also a Social Europe, where improving the wellbeing of workers and their families is an equally important priority.

The ETUC Standardisation Project (ETUC STAND) aims at ensuring, sustaining and reinforcing trade union representation and effective participation in the development of standards. It crystallises the ETUC's long-standing demand that standards should ensure the highest quality of working conditions, including among others a high level of occupational health and safety. Moreover, the ETUC insists on the autonomy of the social partners, which standards should not encroach upon.

Author

The ETUC Standardisation Project would like to thank Tamara Gausi for the preparation of this handbook.

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Disclaimer

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CONFEDERATION SYNDICAT EUROPEÆN TRADE UNION

Standards at the workplace:

What they are and why you need to know about them

A SIMPLE HANDBOOK ON WHAT STANDARDS ARE, WHY THEY EXIST, HOW THEY AFFECT PEOPLE'S WORKING LIVES AND HOW TRADE UNIONS CAN USE STANDARDS TO IMPROVE THE WORLD OF WORK

March 2025

Foreword

Claes-Mikael Ståhl
Deputy General Secretary,
European Trade Union Confederation

Standardisation sounds technical at best, confusing at worst. As you scratch the surface and focus on the essentials, however, you will see right through its complexities: it defines how tools are designed and products are made, as well as how processes are managed and methods applied.

As you will learn from this handbook, standards permeate the world of work. Think of personal protective equipment for firefighters, hairdressers or construction workers (whether helmets, gloves or shoes), or the safety features of high-risk machinery and of ladders used across different sectors. These are only some of the examples that point to the impact of standards on workers' conditions and lives, including their health and safety.

Historically, standards have not been the focus of trade union activities. Yet, their growing implications at the workplace call for increased scrutiny and engagement. Trade unions play a crucial role in this regard. In the conclusion of this handbook, we are reminded that "just as there is no one-size-fits-all approach to the standards, there is no limit to the ways in which trade unionists can be involved". How we as trade unions engage in standards may differ across countries and sectors - but our commitment to doing so should not.

Our involvement should extend beyond participation in drafting committees, to cover a further, very critical step for workers: the implementation of standards at the workplace. This handbook, which comes at an important moment for the ETUC Standardisation Project – its 10th Anniversary – explains why this should be the case. Standards and their impact on workers are here to stay; we as a movement should engage not just in the drafting, but in the implementation of standards too. This is crucial to ensure our demands are met; standards must ensure the highest quality of working conditions and positive outcomes for workers.

Table of contents

List of abbreviations

ANEC	European Consumer Voice in Standardisation
CE marking	Conformité Européene or European Conformity
CEN	Comité Européen de Normalisation or European Committee for Standardization
CENELEC	European Committee for Electrotechnical Standardization
EC	European Commission
ECOS	Environmental Coalition on Standards
EFTA	European Free Trade Association
EN	European standard
ESO	European Standardisation Organisation
ESS	European Standardisation System
ETSI	European Telecommunications Standards Institute
ETUC	European Trade Union Confederation
ETUI	European Trade Union Institute
hEN	Harmonised standard
HRM	Human resource management
IEC	International Electrotechnical Commission
ILO	International Labour Organization
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation
NC	National Committee
NSB	National Standardisation Body
OJEU	Official Journal of the European Union
OSH	Occupational safety and health
PPE	Personal protective equipment
TC	Technical Committees
TBT	Technical Barriers to Trade
WTO	World Trade Organization

PART ONE

An introduction to standards

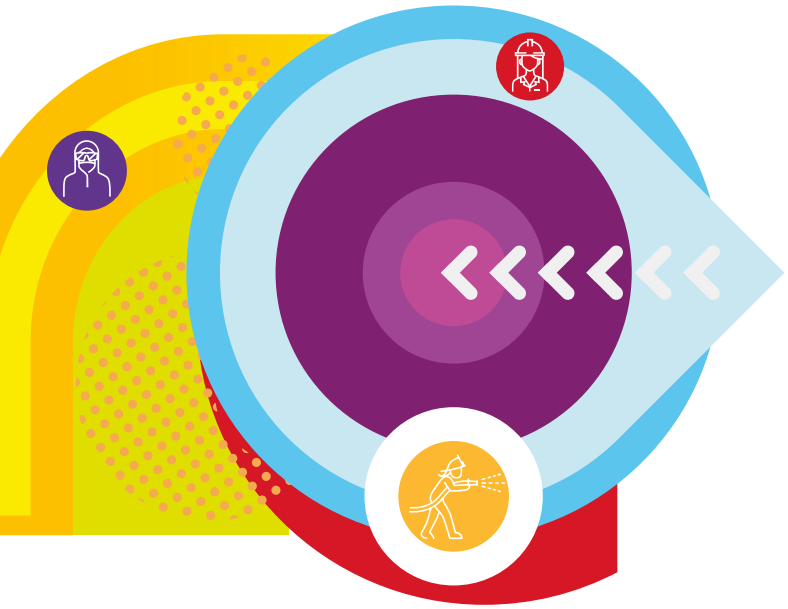
1. What are standards?

The fuel in your car, the food on your plate, the toys your children play with, even the paper or electronic device that you are reading this on: they have all been shaped by standards. While you may not know the term, you are definitely familiar with their impact. Simply put, standards – and in particular, technical standards – provide rules, guidance or specifications on the way in which products are manufactured and services are rendered, regardless of who makes the product or who provides the service. First conceived in 19th century England as a means of guiding mechanical engineering processes during the Industrial Revolution, they have always been a tool primarily used by industry for industry, whether to ensure interoperability, compatibility, safety or to enable free trade.

Today, there are tens of thousands of standards (including over 35,000 international standards[1]) in use all over the globe covering the metaphorical, and sometimes actual, nuts and bolts of our modern world. In Europe, standards enable the single market; globally, they are the oil that grease the wheel of free trade, helping to remove technical barriers to trade (TBT), as stipulated by the World Trade Organization's (WTO) landmark TBT Agreement[2] (there will be more on this in chapter two). The vast majority of standards provide technical specifications, which ensure a minimum standard of safety and/or quality for a product. These standards are a positive thing and help contribute to a safe working environment. But as the global economy has shifted from one dominated by manufacturing to one focused on services, the scope of what standards cover has expanded. Today we not only have technical standards covering mechanical processes, but increasingly, standards address many of the other areas at the heart of trade union work such as health and safety, human resource management (HRM), privacy at work, artificial intelligence, social and environmental issues, and training.

[1] As of November 2024, the International Organization for Standardization(ISO) has published 25,638 standards while the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) put their figures at 7475 standards and the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) notes that it has over 4,000 Recommendations, as their standards are known, in force: https://www.iso.org/about; https://www.iec.ch/what-we-do/facts-figures; https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-T/publications/Pages/default.aspx.

[2] https://tbtcode.iso.org/home.html



While this expansion may seem laudable – and in some cases, it is – the standardisation system's multi-stakeholder standard-setting process is often opaque and exclusionary, with – contrary to social dialogue – limited influence for trade unions. Standards are privately developed by standard-setting organisations, many of which go on to sell their standards to generate income. The certification and auditing of standards is also mostly for-profit. There are no tripartite discussions when standards are being developed, and in most cases, standards are written and published without any input from worker representatives, environmental bodies or other social actors, despite the fact that numerous standards have a massive impact on the way we work, the environment in which we live and the products that we consume.

In theory, employers are not legally bound to comply with a given standard, but in reality, there are compelling reasons, and sometimes legal considerations, that require them to do so. In Europe, some standards (see chapter three) help companies to comply with European Union (EU) law. For example, where it is stated in a contract or in a marking or labelling scheme that a product or service must comply with one or more standards, then an employer must adhere to said standard(s). Standards are also often used as technical specifications in public procurement, so that anyone wishing to submit a tender must comply with specific standards in order to compete for a contract. In addition, the exponential market growth of standards – in part because they are not legally binding, which means that they are easier to adapt to market and technological developments – is resulting in their encroachment on the legal safeguards traditionally provided by national legislation, European legislation and International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions. Consequently, while trade unions recognise the importance of standards in promoting European competitiveness on global markets and, in many cases, affecting working conditions, unions also have a key role to play in defining which standards are developed, the spaces in which standards can operate, and the way in which they are implemented to ensure that workers' rights and the current model of social dialogue is not sacrificed at the altar of profit. It is for this reason that the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) has been actively involved in standard-setting processes and activities since 2015, and is pushing to get more trade unionists involved in this area of work.

2. Standards in Europe: a brief history of a complex idea

Standards have existed for millennia – think of the use of unified measurements as ancient empires traded with each other – but the first formal attempt to codify manufacturing standards was born in what was then the 'workshop of the world', in the United Kingdom. At the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, in

1800,

Henry Maudslay's invention of a metal lathe to cut metal enabled the manufacturing of standard screw thread sizes which led to the possibility of interchangeable parts; and this eventually facilitated the birth of mass production. Over the course of the 19th century, standardisation evolved from something that took place at the enterprise level to the emergence of, first professional bodies (initially for engineers), then private standardisation organisations and then, at the beginning of the 20th century, National Standardisation Bodies (NSBs).

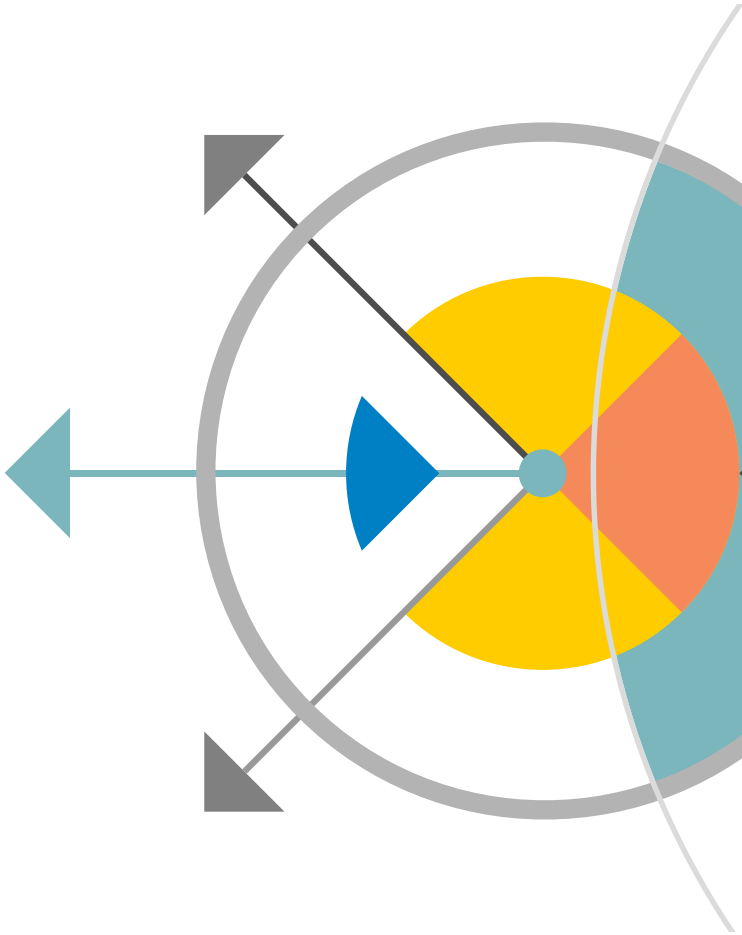
From a European perspective, the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in

1951,

which rose from the ashes of the Second World War, laid the foundations to integrate Europe's coal and steel industries into, for the first time, a common market to support economic expansion and to improve living and working conditions. The war had devastated Europe's economy, and while it was initially only signed by Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands, the ECSC shaped the trajectory of post-war Europe by creating a shared political and economic framework to ensure peace and prosperity on the continent. This aim was further solidified by the

1957

Treaty of Rome, which gave birth to the European Economic Community (EEC) signed by the 'original six' member states. This led to calls for proposals for the creation of a single market for goods, labour, services, and capital.



Although formal bodies to ensure workers' health and safety were established as early as 1951 with the creation of the Montán Committee for miners and steelworkers across the ECSC, it was the Rome Agreement that provided the legal apparatus to ensure minimum standards for the health and safety of workers with legally binding rules known as directives. In the proceeding years, directives on areas such as tractors and agricultural machinery, protection against harmful chemicals, and against major industrial accidents to name but a few areas, were adopted. The health and safety of European workers was further consolidated by the launch of the tripartite Luxembourg Committee in

1974,

which was created to support the Commission of the European Communities (as it was then) in preparing and implementing activities in the area of health and safety at work, as well as to enable cooperation between member states, trade unions and employers' organisations.

But it is the creation of the 'New Approach' during Jacques Delors' tenure as President of the European Commission between

1985-1995

that is of greatest consequence when discussing the development of standards in Europe. Previously, European directives on product standards applied to individual products and detailed everything down to the smallest screw. But this was inefficient, and in response to concerns over economic competition from the United States and Japan, the Delors Commission laid out proposals on how to launch a dynamic, single European market by 1992. The free movement of goods (as well as services, capital and people) formed the bedrock of this goal and the 'Council Resolution of 7 May 1985 on a New Approach to technical harmonization and standards'[3] etched out the roadmap of how to get there – by removing the technical barriers to trade while ensuring high standards of health, safety, environmental and consumer protections. This 'New Approach' saw the European Commission tasked with creating the legal framework, via directives, to define the 'essential requirements' that a particular class of products (for example, toys, machinery or medical devices) must meet in order to be sold on the single market. At the same time, under a mandate from the Commission, European Standardisation Organisations (ESOs) would be entrusted with drawing up and publishing the detailed technical specifications, in the form of 'harmonised European standards' (more on this in chapter three), which would ensure that the requirements of these directives were met. Although the standards would remain voluntary, and goods would still be able to meet the essential requirements of the directives by other means, compliance with a specific standard would be seen as a guarantee of conformity with the essential requirements of any said directive.

This 'New Approach' was formalised with the adoption of the Single European Act in

1987,

which strengthened the role of social partners by establishing a legal basis for social dialogue. The 1989 Community Charter of the Fundamental Social Rights of Workers[4] outlined a set of essential rights in areas including freedom of movement, freedom of association and collective bargaining, health and safety and fair wages, among others. And while the Conservative government in the United Kingdom prevented the Charter from becoming legally binding, the Charter did establish the major principles on which current European labour law is based. It also shaped the development of the European social model which recognises the indivisibility of economic development from social progress. In February

1992,

the Maastricht Treaty unified three different European communities – the European Atomic Energy Community, the ECSC and the European Economic Community – into a single body, known henceforth as the European Union.

Standardisation has played a key role in creating the EU single market and in supporting Europe's strong position in the global economy. Further, the adoption of the New Legislative Framework[5] in

[3] https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/9f7c3a42-449e-4ccc-9a29-5a544003b338/language-en
[4] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/community-charter-of-fundamental-social-rights-of-workers.html
[5] https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/single-market/goods/new-legislative-framework_en

2008

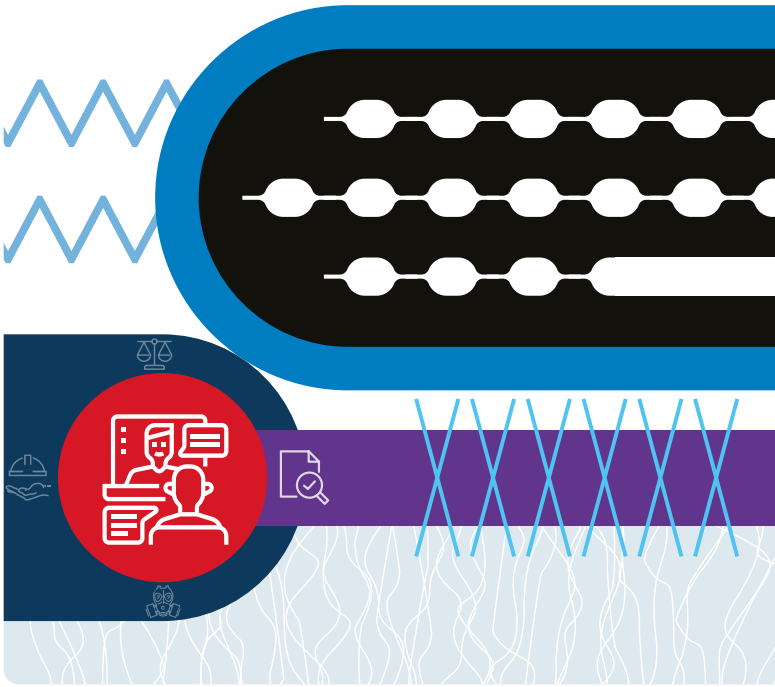
provided a general set of rules and principles to make legislation on the Single Market for Goods clearer, more consistent and more effective. But as the EU seeks to boost its competitiveness, standards in Europe are at the heart of the EU's vision of the continent's future. Whether in relation to just transition, the digital transition or boosting productivity, technical standards anchor the detail on 'how' these vital developments can be achieved. In February

2022,

the EU Commission presented its EU Strategy on Standardisation[6] which outlines five action points to enable "setting global standards in support of a resilient, green and digital EU single market". It calls for: a focus on anticipating standardisation needs in strategic areas; improving the current European Standardisation System (ESS) by proposing an amendment to EU Regulation 1025/2012 (more on this in chapter 3); enhancing EU leadership in global standards; fostering innovation; and enabling the next generation of standardisation experts. It mirrors many of the points laid out in a recent landmark report on the future of EU competitiveness[7], which offered a roadmap on how to reignite economic growth and raise productivity in the EU in a bid to sustain the European Social Model. Whether it is in relation to the development and promotion of standards in key areas such as cybersecurity and artificial intelligence or hydrogen and electric batteries, as the then EU Commissioner for the Internal Market, Thierry Breton stated with the launch of the EU Standardisation Strategy[8]: "Technical standards are of strategic importance. Europe's technological sovereignty, ability to reduce dependencies and protection of EU values will rely on our ability to be a global standard-setter."

3. The European Standardisation System

While it is true that the European Standardisation System is exceptional in the world of standards, it is also an intrinsic part of a larger global standards ecosystem that in many ways functions as a whole.



Standards are developed at various levels globally – primarily at the regional, international and sometimes national levels – but only in Europe (thanks to the New Approach and the subsequent New Legislative Framework) are there harmonised laws and standards between countries as well as common standards to support the implementation of EU law.

There are tens of thousands of people working within standardisation processes in Europe, but within the ESS, there are three bodies (collectively known as ESOs, or European Standards Organisations) tasked with the sole responsibility of producing standards: CENELEC (the standards body for the electrotechnical field), ETSI (the standards body for telecommunications) and CEN (the European Committee for Standardization, which covers all other domains). These three organisations publish thousands of new standards every year[9] and represent the 34 National Standardisation Bodies (NSBs, which are also known as national committees, or NCs, within CENELEC) that comprise their members. These NSBs come from the 27 member states of the European Union as well as three of the four members of the European Free Trade Area (Iceland, Norway and Switzerland) plus North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey and the United Kingdom. All countries in wider Europe comply with the ESS.

[6] https://ec.europa.eu/docsroom/documents/48598
[7] *The future of European competitiveness* by Mario Draghi, published September 2024: https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/97e481fd-2dc3-412d-be4c-f152a8232961_en?filename=The%20future%20of%20European%20competitiveness%20_%20A%20competitiveness%20strategy%20for%20Europe.pdf
[8] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_661
[9] In 2023, CEN published 872 standards, CENELEC published 445 standards and ETSI states that it published over 3,000 standards: https://www.cencenelec.eu/about-cen/cen-in-figures/; https://www.cencenelec.eu/about-cenelec/cenelec-in-figures/; https://www.3gpp.org/ftp/Information/presentations/Presentations_2024/01_ETSI.pdf

Central to the ESS is the fact that the EU Commission mandates an ESO body to describe in technical terms the requirements that a certain type of product must meet to comply with EU law. The result is a harmonised standard (hEN) which is subsequently implemented in all EU member states. There are currently around 3,600 harmonised standards[10], and they can be found in areas ranging from personal protective equipment (PPE) to machinery and artificial intelligence. But harmonised standards only represent about 15 per cent of the standards written in Europe. The vast majority of standards (which are known as non-harmonised standards) are either European standards (EN) that are written by the ESOs and then adopted at the national level, or international standards drafted by international standards bodies (read more on this later in this chapter) and then applied in Europe, where the standard is, de facto, compliant. But at all three levels, the standards-setting bodies tasked with drafting and publishing new standards are mostly private organisations[11]. Standards are copyrighted documents that have to be purchased from the NSBs , even though standards are sometimes used in support of EU legislation (you can read more about some of the complications surrounding this at the end of this chapter). And while some standards function as guidance there are additional costs associated with confirming compliance for standards that require certification; this is a separate service that is usually provided by commercial certification bodies.

EU Regulation 1025/2012[12] provides the legal framework around standardisation in products and services in the EU. It also identifies information and communication technology (ICT) technical specifications and crucially, in Annex III, financially supports (via the Commission and EFTA) and facilitates (via the ESOs) underrepresented societal stakeholders to participate in standardisation processes. These societal stakeholders are represented by the consumer body ANEC, the environmental coalition ECOS, the ETUC, which represents workers, and SBS, on behalf of small and medium-sized enterprises. In 2024, the EU Commission began evaluating the ability of Regulation 1025/2012 to "sufficiently respond to the new opportunities and challenges of globalisation, ensure the public's safety, and support the green and digital transition," exploring the possibility of amending its content.

There are hundreds of labels which demonstrate compliance to different standards – from the Fairtrade label to the British Standards Institute's Kitemark to TCO Sweden's label for computer monitors. Many of these labels relate to de facto standards, which refer to standards that are accepted in practice, but which have not undergone any formal process to obtain consensus. The most well-known, and the most consequential label in the European context, is the 'CE' mark. The initials 'CE' stand for *Conformité Européene* or European Conformity, and this label is given to products that meet the legislative requirements to be sold within the EU. However, products can obtain the CE marking in different ways. In the case of highly technical products like high-risk machinery or medical devices, the machinery needs to be tested against the standard by a notified body or specialist laboratory identified at the national level, as stipulated by the 2006 Machinery Directive[13]; only then can this machinery or device be sold in Europe. But for other products, companies can self-assess their own compliance.

[10] https://ec.europa.eu/docsroom/documents/48602
[11] Some National Standardisation Bodies are partially publicly funded.
[12] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2012:316:0012:0033:EN:PDF
[13] The Machinery Directive is one of the most important pieces of legislation for harmonising the essential safety requirements for machinery within the European Union. It describes standardised health and safety requirements for interactions between humans and machines. The EU Commission has further developed the Directive to become the Machinery Regulation, in order to further improve safety levels and stay abreast of technological developments. However, its application does not become mandatory until 20 January 2027.

According to the CEN-CENELEC website: "The development of a European standard is governed by the principles of consensus, openness, transparency, national commitment and technical coherence" and "with the involvement of all interested parties in a transparent, open and consensus-based process"[14]. However, there are concerns about the system. As the ETUC outlined in the 2022 report *Trade union access to national standardisation committees*: "...the growing role of harmonised European standards and more generally of standards in supporting legislation and policy objectives, has raised important questions and challenges concerning representativeness, legitimacy, and the conditions under which interested parties, including trade unions, can access standardisation activities"[15]. There will be more on the topic of the involvement and inclusion of trade unions in the standard-setting process in the next chapter.

The ESS is currently at a crossroads. As previously mentioned, in 2024 the EU Commission began assessing the need to revise Regulation 1025/2012; moreover, a high-level forum has been set up to look at the future of standards in Europe[16]. The first issue is that the development of new standards in digital technologies is largely taking place outside of the EU. As the 2019 EU Parliament briefing *Standards and the digitalisation of EU industry*[17] notes: "this trend could undermine the EU's future comparative advantage and weaken the competitiveness of European industry in the long term". The second issue is that, in essence, there are two parallel systems at play: the bottom-up approach where industry decides which standards they want to develop, and the New Approach where the Commission, from top down, mandates ESOs to develop specific standards. This often produces completely different priorities. It is also the case that the WTO and the big multinationals, especially the tech giants, prefer international standards. Even though the Vienna Agreement (read more on this later in this chapter) facilitates the adoption of international standards at the European level, having to comply with two sets of standards sometimes means two production lines, which comes at a cost for industry. But as well as maintaining the high-quality of its harmonised standards, the EU also wants to increase its competitiveness on the global market, so there are real concerns about the best way forward.

"The development of a European standard is governed by the principles of consensus, openness, transparency, national commitment and technical coherence with the involvement of all interested parties in a transparent, open and consensus-based process" (CEN-CENELEC website)

[14] https://www.cencenelec.eu/european-standardization/european-standards/
[15] https://www.etuc.org/sites/default/files/page/file/2023-05/Brochure%20Accesse%20Condition%20to%20national%20mirror%20committee_EN_v4.pdf
[16] For more information on the High-Level Forum on European Standardisation, read here: https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/single-market/european-standards/standardisation-policy/high-level-forum-european-standardisation_en
[17] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/635608/EPRS_BRI(2019)635608_EN.pdf

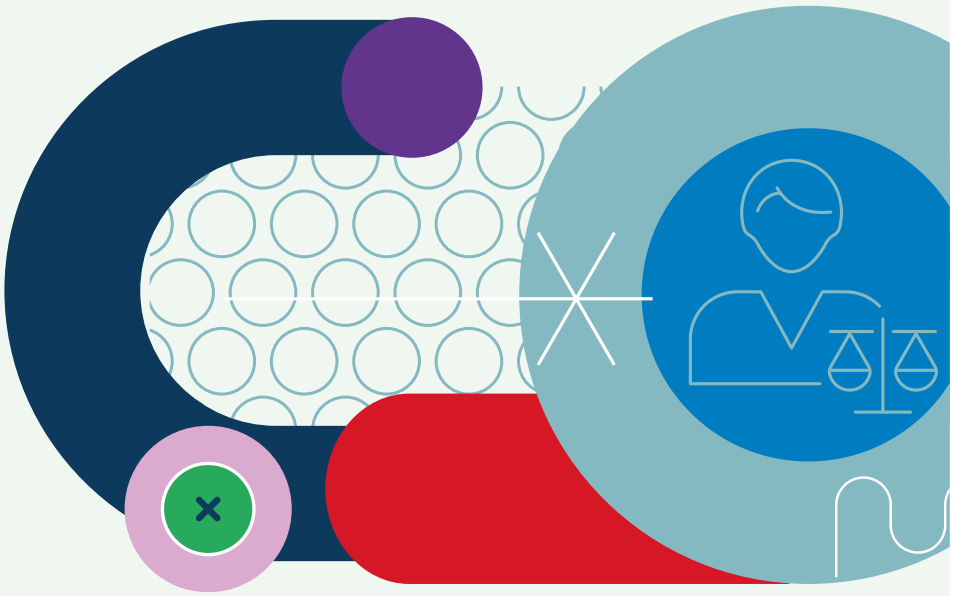
Box 1

The James Elliott and 'Malamud' cases

There are many legal cases that have helped and are helping to shape the trajectory of European standards but the two outlined below are among the most consequential.

James Elliott: The Court of Justice of the European Union ruling in the 2016 case of James Elliott Construction Limited v Irish Asphalt Limited (Case C-613/14)[18] is considered a landmark decision as it classified, for the first time, some harmonised European standards, the reference of which is published in the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU), "as part of EU law". The ruling acknowledges that standards have legal effects, despite the fact that they are voluntary and that private organisations are in charge of their development.

The 'Malamud case': European Court case C588/P21[19], commonly known as the 'Malamud case', was initiated by two public information non-profits, led by the US activist Carl Malamud. In a landmark March 2024 ruling related to four specific harmonised standards, the Court found that EU citizens should have public access to harmonised standards on the basis that they form part of EU law and therefore, there is an overriding public interest justifying the disclosure of the harmonised standards. While the judgement has the potential to disrupt the business model of the standardisation bodies, as the paywall protecting harmonised standards could potentially be removed, the European Commission, ESOs and NSBs are reportedly working together to find a way to implement the Court's judgement. In the meantime, the balance of public interest and copyright, and the general applicability of the sentence, remain on the agenda.



[18] You can read the full text of the ruling here: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A62014CJ0613; you can also read some analysis on the significance of the case, produced by the environmental coalition ECOS, here: https://ecostandard.org/wp-content/uploads/2018-06-11-The-use-of-standards-in-legislation-and-policies-ECOS-discussion-paper.pdf.
[19] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A62021CJ0588

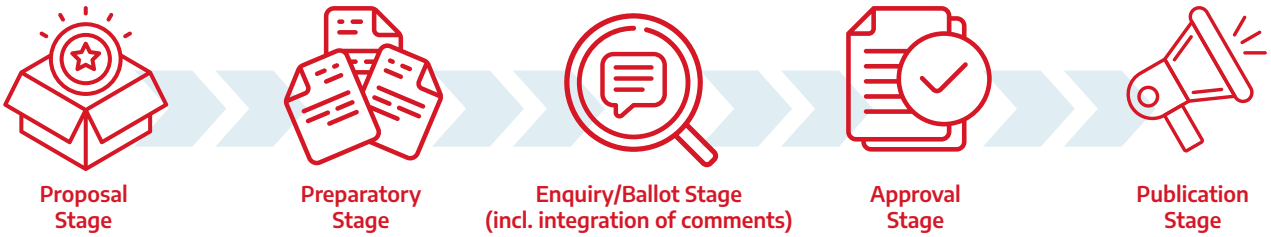
Box 2

International standards and the Vienna Agreement

There are some 32,500 individual, international standards (ISO and IEC combined) in use around the world and they are underpinned by the rules of global trade that are regulated and facilitated by the World Trade Organization (WTO). One of the WTO's cornerstone agreements is the Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) Agreement which aims to ensure that technical regulations, standards and conformity assessment procedures do not create unnecessary technical barriers to trade. At the international level, standards are primarily developed by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), as well as the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) and the International Telecoms Union (ITU) with the involvement of National Standardisation Bodies (NSBs) such as the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) and the Japanese Standards Association (JSA) at the national level. Standards developed by the international and European standardisation bodies align with WTO principles, including the TBT Agreement. In addition, CEN, CENELEC and ETSI are also compliant with EU Regulation 1025/2012 (regarding harmonised standards specifically). To prevent the duplication of work at the international and European levels and to promote the sharing of resources, the Vienna Agreement on technical cooperation between ISO and CEN was signed in 1991. As a result, a growing number of new standards projects are jointly planned between CEN and ISO.

4. How are standards developed?

Standardisation Process: General Steps



(A brief description of the standardisation process, from proposal to publication)

At CEN-CENELEC, ISO and IEC, standards are developed in technical committees (TCs) of which there are hundreds – and their related working groups, of which there are thousands – covering items as specific as pulleys and belts (ISO/TC 41) and areas as broad as human resources management (ISO/TC 260). Each NSB sends a national delegation of experts to represent their consensus position in the TC. This standpoint is previously discussed and defined in the national mirror committees (when they exist) of the different NSBs, which reflect the European or international TCs and gather all interested parties, such as industry experts (which range from SMEs to certification bodies, laboratories and other actors) to partner organisations (representing trade unions, consumers and environmental organisations). In Europe, the national mirror committees of the respective NSBs hold voting rights in the development of standards, in CEN-CENELEC, ISO and IEC. Any standard adopted by CEN-CENELEC must be implemented at the national level by its members (i.e. the NSBs), while any conflicting national standards must be withdrawn. Although the working documents outlining the development of standards are written in English, the actual discussions usually take place in the national languages of the NSBs to allow for broad participation. European standards are published in three official languages – English, French and German. However, they can be translated into other languages by the NSBs once the standards have been published.

At the European level, the ETUC has the status of a 'partner organisation' of CEN which means that it participates at the policy level and in the technical discussions that impact workers. However, the ETUC does not have a vote. At ISO, the ETUC is not a partner organisation, nor can it participate at the policy level. To participate at the technical level, it must first request 'liaison status' to participate in the development of standards – and this participation is not always granted. The International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) is also recognised as a liaison organisation at ISO, but similar to the ETUC at both CEN and ISO, it has no voting rights. All of this means that the development of technical standards takes place without any trade union involvement in the decision-making process.

The ESOs produce a variety of documents (see box 3 for further details) which are produced by the TCs. Only the ENs and hENs are obligatory, transposed as national standards by the NSBs. The NSBs can also generate an income by selling (harmonised) standards.

At CEN-CENELEC, there is even a standard for standards. The Business Operations Support System[20] (known as BOSS) provides practical information to those working on standards within the CEN-CENELEC system, describing processes and giving instructions and guidance which enable standardisation work to be carried out.

The New Legislative Framework links EU legislation with standardisation requests which define the essential requirements that are mandatory where standards are a tool – mainly for manufacturers, industry and importers – to comply with those essential requirements. At the Commission's request, CEN, CENELEC and ETSI develop harmonised standards but compared with non-harmonised standards, there tends to be greater stakeholder engagement in this process. Within this framework, trade unions have a very important role to play. Harmonised standards are then referenced in the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU).

[20] https://boss.cen.eu/

Box 3

What are the different types of publications?

There are many different types of documents at play in the ESS. Here are just some of them:

European standard (EN):

This is a standard adopted by a European Standardisation Organisation (ESO). Once adopted, National Standardisation Bodies (NSBs) have to transpose them into identical national standards and withdraw any conflicting national standards.

Harmonised European standard (hEN):

Harmonised standards are European standards developed by an ESO following a request, known as a 'mandate' (or 'standardisation request') from the European Commission, to help products from anywhere in the world on sale within the EU be compliant with EU law. Harmonised standards represent about 15 per cent of all standardisation work in Europe.

Technical reports (TR):

TRs provide information on the technical content of standardisation work.

Technical specifications (TS):

TSs spell out the required characteristics of the goods, services or works that a supplier has to provide.

Workshop agreements (WA) or a CEN-CENELEC workshop agreement (CWA):

A WA or a CWA is an agreement developed and approved in an ETSI or CEN-CENELEC workshop; the latter is open to the direct participation of anyone with an interest in the development of the agreement, with no geographical limit on participation. The development of a CWA is fast and flexible, on average between 10 to 12 months. A WA or CWA does not have the status of an EN as it involves no legal obligation at the national level, however, a WA/CWA can become an EN.

CEN-CENELEC guides:

These are reference documents published by CEN-CENELEC to give orientation, advice or recommendations on standardisation principles and policies, as well as to offer guidance to standards writers. Examples include CEN Guide 15 for service standards, and CEN Guide 32 on climate change adaptation in standards.

The following is not elaborated by ISO/IEC and CEN-CENELEC but still plays an important role within the ESS

Horizontal and vertical standards:

Vertical standards, sometimes called application standards, are standards that apply to a particular industry or to particular operations, practices, conditions, processes, means, methods, equipment and installations, etc. Application-specific areas should be addressed by vertical standards, or 'stand-alone documents', which only address the necessary information specific to that application or product. Horizontal standards on the other hand, which are sometimes called general or basic standards, address more general standards which apply across multiple industries.

De facto standards:

Also known as market-driven standards, these are the rules, systems and measurements that are widely adopted by market-dominant companies or by specific industries and their customers, which function as a standard, often without any publicly available documentation.

PART TWO

The impact of standards on workers

5. How do standards affect workers and why are standards a trade union issue?

Standards are big business. Currently, there are tens of thousands of standards in use globally and thousands of new standards published every year. Although the development of standards is a complex process that can take years to complete, there are more and more standards being developed at various levels, many of which have a significant impact on workers and their working conditions. In particular, there are an increasing number of standards with a labour component being developed for certification at an international level. These international (ISO) standards can then be applied and implemented at company level, in your company, directly affecting its workers. This is happening with little or no involvement from trade unions. Some examples include ISO 29997 on quality internships, ISO 37200 on managing the risk of modern slavery and ISO's expansion into standards on services[21].

And while the push for more technical standards with social content is coming from ISO and not Europe (Article 114, Paragraph 2 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union[22] generally prohibits the development of harmonised standards that address the interests and rights of employed people), the traditional mechanisms of social dialogue and collective agreements are still being usurped by new procedures which may be more efficient for regulators and industry, but reduce the influence of trade unions and the framework of actual legislation.

Trade union interest in standards began about 30 years ago with occupational safety and health (OSH). The European Commission was planning to introduce OSH standards for areas of trade union interest such as machinery and personal protective equipment, and trade unions got involved to ensure that the highest levels of safety were written into the standards. Today, trade union participation in standard-setting remains crucial, particularly when it comes to health and safety, as the expertise and insights of trade union reps can result in significant improvements to the lives of workers. For example, trade unions were closely involved with the development of ISO 12604, a standard for aircraft ground handling. Representatives from the Swedish trade unions participating in the development of the standard were able to emphasise the dangers posed by workers having to bend, crawl and carry heavy equipment when loading checked bags, as well as the crucial importance of ergonomic OSH standards for airport equipment. The unions presented research conducted in partnership with university researchers that offered guidelines on how to reduce and remove the risk of injury to airport baggage handling workers, including new designs

[21] https://www.iso.org/services.html
[22] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/treaty-on-the-functioning-of-the-european-union.html

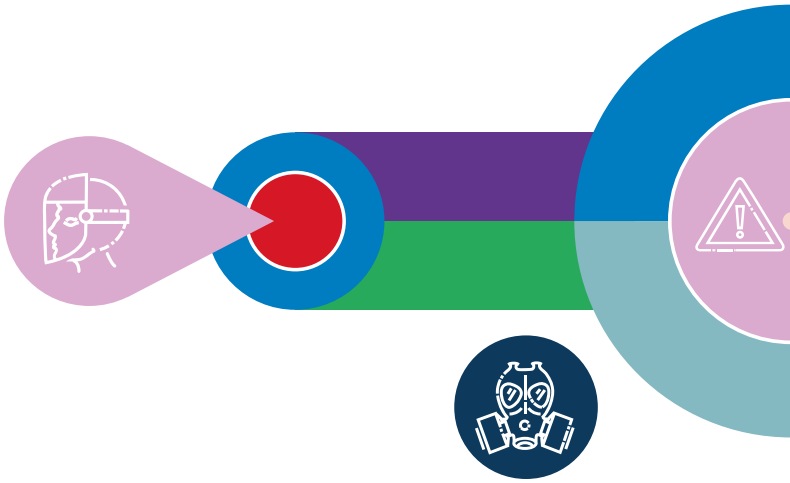
for top-opening airplane containers which have now become industry standard.

The core of trade union work has always been about ensuring decent working conditions with good wages, labour laws that protect workers, safe equipment and a safe and healthy working environment. Specific standards for machine safety, substances, PPE, OSH standards and other things that we use at work can help facilitate decent work. **But if trade unions do not have a seat at the table where the decisions are made and standards are produced, how can they ensure that the voices of workers are heard?** In a bid to sustain and reinforce trade union representation and effective participation in European standardisation, the ETUC launched the ETUC STAND project[23] in 2015. Financially supported by the European Commission and EFTA, as foreseen by EU Regulation 1025/2012, its work focuses on ensuring effective representation at both the policy and technical levels of standards development, while training trade union experts to effectively participate in technical committees and to disseminate information related to standardisation among worker representatives.

6. EN ISO 45001: a cautionary tale

The vast majority of standards relate to products. When manufacturers meet the requirements written in these standards, it ensures a minimum level of conformity and in some cases (as previously mentioned), complying with the standard means presumed compliance with the law. But there are a set of management standards that operate in an entirely different way. Previously, issues surrounding management systems and human resource management were discussed between employers and employees. But the ground of social dialogue is slowly being ceded to standards. These management system and HRM standards – such as ISO 9001 on quality management systems, ISO 14001 on environmental management systems and ISO 30415 on diversity and inclusion – make recommendations on some aspect of an organisation.

EN ISO 45001, an international standard for occupational health and safety management systems, is one of the best-known management standards. Published in March 2018 (and under revision in early 2024), it serves as a set of requirements that an employer must meet in order to achieve certification.



However, as ISO management standards are generic by design, so that they can be applied to organisations of all sizes across sectors, meeting the requirements of the standard is open to significant interpretation. Despite the fact that EN ISO 45001 includes a section on worker consultation and participation– which was quite a feat, achieved thanks to the active involvement of trade unions in the development of the standard – there is no explicit mention or recognition of trade unions in the text. At best, EN ISO 45001 certification is a way of helping employers raise health and safety standards; at worst, its impact is limited to proving that an employer has done everything required to implement the management system that is laid down in the standard. This last point raises concerns because health and safety is about much more than having effective systems – it requires effective worker engagement.

From the outset, a number of trade unions, including the ETUC, opposed the development of this standard. Firstly, it was mainly written by industry consultants and certification bodies. Secondly, unions were of the view that it was below par in terms of existing ILO standards (namely the ILO Guidelines on occupational safety and health management systems, ILO-OSH 2001) in areas such as the obligation of employers to cover the cost of PPE and training related to occupational health and safety. These voluntary ILO guidelines have barely been taken up on the market because quite simply, there is no commercial incentive. Certifiers actively promote EN ISO 45001, sell it to businesses and then make money from checking that it is being correctly implemented; this cannot

[23] You can read more about ETUC STAND and access further resources on standardisation here: https://www.etuc.org/en/etuc-stand-project

be done with ILO voluntary guidelines. Trade unions were also of the view that workplace standards were best developed by social dialogue and through the tripartite system, not with the multistakeholder model (as is the case in standardisation) which can include 10 or even 20 stakeholders, mostly from industry, thus weakening the impact of worker representation. Trade unions also expressed concerns that EN ISO 45001 could lead to employers concentrating on achieving and maintaining certification rather than working with worker representatives to control risks.

However, EN ISO 45001 has been a huge commercial success. In 2023 alone, over 300,000 companies globally were certified[24]. Nevertheless, certifiers are private companies; health and safety is just one of many areas that they cover but by paying for this standard, businesses get to use a logo which says 'I am EN ISO 45001-compliant'. This is not the same as having to undergo the rigour of a labour inspection (in contexts where strong labour protections and rigorous labour inspections actually exist), and is why trade unions called this standard 'social washing'. In this context, the risks and limitations of using EN ISO 45001 in support of national legislation are evident.

Trade unions are not against standards, but union involvement in the development and implementation

of high-quality standards – which focus on technical aspects, and which respect the role of social dialogue, collective bargaining and ILO conventions – is essential. This is particularly true when it comes to the subset of standards that have direct implications on workers. It is also imperative that companies that want to implement EN ISO 45001 do so in cooperation with unions and workplace safety representatives.

Trade unions are not against standards, but union involvement in the development and implementation of high-quality standards – which focus on technical aspects, and which respect the role of social dialogue, collective bargaining and ILO conventions – is essential.

[24] https://www.iso.org/committee/54998.html?t=KomURwikWDLiuB1P1c7SjLMLEAgXOA7emZHKGWyn8f3KQUTU3m287NxnpA3Dluxm&view=documents#section-isodocuments-top

7. Trade union involvement in standards – from development to implementation

As stated on page 45 of the *ETUC Action Programme 2023-2027*[25]: "The European strategy on standardisation has developed a political ambition to push for an inclusive and multi-stakeholder approach to standardisation. On this basis, "the ETUC has invested in this avenue to build capacity and increase trade unions' representation and action in standardisation at the European and national levels". The role of trade unions in the standardisation process is two-fold. First, trade unions have the opportunity to influence the development of standards, especially by ensuring that the interests of workers are taken into account when new standards are being written. Then, and perhaps most importantly, **worker representatives have a vital role to play in ensuring the meaningful application of standards at the company level**.

a) Trade unions and the development of standards

At the European level, trade unions have been involved in the development of standards since the ETUC set up the European Trade Union Technical Bureau for Health and Safety (now the Health and Safety Department of the European Trade Union Institute for Research, better known as the ETUI) in the mid-1980s, among others, supporting trade union representatives involved in standardisation work, specifically in relation to machinery. Today, the impact that trade unions have on the development of standards is restrained by the simple fact that unions are not sufficiently involved when standards are being set, particularly international standards. The committees that deliberate the introduction of new standards are made up of technical experts who are appointed by their NSBs, and many of these experts – be they manufacturers or standardisation consultants – have a commercial interest in the outcome of said standard.

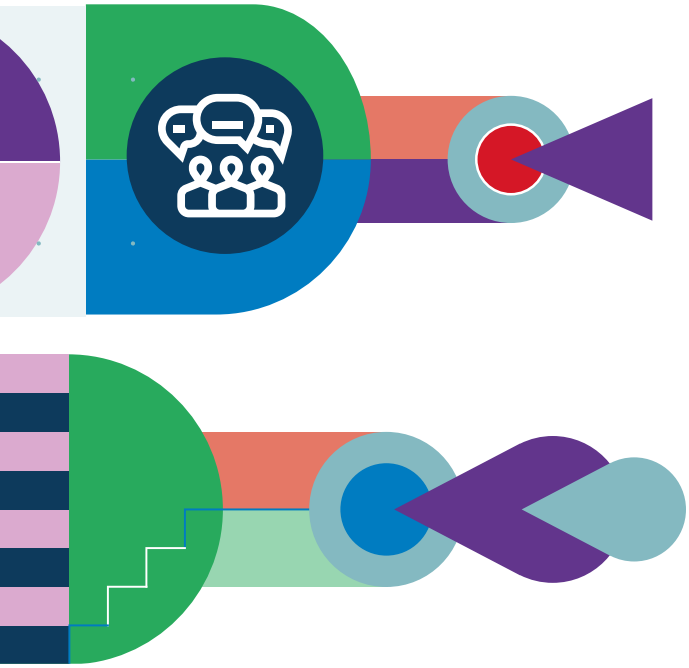
But when trade unions do have a seat at the table, they have two opportunities to impact the development: at the proposal stage and at the drafting stage. When a new standard is proposed, unions can make their opposition known if they do not agree with its development. Often, the standard development process continues despite this opposition, but there are numerous examples of the positive impact of trade union intervention at the pre-development stage. For example, in 2020, ISO proposed setting up a TC on 'Social Responsibility', which unions feared would have led to the expansion of 'social' standards. Following negotiations by the ETUC, the ITUC, the ILO and other organisations, ISO dropped its plans to set up this new TC. However, unions are still vigilant about ISO's expansion into this area.

At the drafting stage, trade unions can have an impact if they can participate in the process and if they have the right expertise. Where standardisation work takes place despite trade union opposition, the ETUC seeks to influence the process and content to make sure that it:

1. does not interfere with existing national and European legislation nor with ILO conventions;
2. is worker-friendly; and
3. does not contravene the role of trade unions, social dialogue and collective bargaining.

> THE ETUC HAS INVESTED IN THIS AVENUE TO BUILD CAPACITY AND INCREASE TRADE UNIONS' REPRESENTATION AND ACTION IN STANDARDISATION AT THE EUROPEAN AND NATIONAL LEVELS

[25] https://www.etuc.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/ETUC%20Action%20Programme_Together%20for%20a%20Fair%20Deal%20for%20Workers.pdf



A good example of how trade unions can positively influence the drafting of a standard is ISO 26000 – Guidance on Social Responsibility. Published in 2010 following five years of negotiations, it was ISO's first foray into social standards and covers issues such as labour rights, human rights, the environment and community involvement. It was developed by a working group of 500 experts organised into six different stakeholder categories, with trade unions being one of the most active. This was one of the first times that ISO had to understand and fully consider the trade union point of view, and as such, the final standard was positively shaped by the decisive contributions of trade unions from all over the world, as well as the ILO. For example, it was one of the first international standards to explicitly address gender issues; it was also published as guidelines rather than as a set of actual requirements because trade unions did not want it to receive certification. Unfortunately, after the publication of ISO 26000 in 2010, ISO did not seek to repeat this level of trade union involvement, and unions have been urging to constrain ISO's expansion of social standards ever since.

Other times, even when trade unions are closely involved in the development of a standard, frustratingly, the results can still fall short of the desired outcome. A case in point is prEN 17436 - Cabin Air Quality on Civil Aircraft[26]. Starting in 2015, trade unions, represented by the ETUC and the European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF), were involved in the TC tasked with developing a new standard to provide cleaner and safer cabin air in commercial aircrafts. But despite deliberating the standard for several years, at the final stage in 2022 it was adopted as a 'technical report' (as CEN/TR 17904:2022) rather than as a standard with specific requirements to ensure the health and safety of crew members.

It is important for trade unions to get involved in the standardisation process, not only as observers at the international level (via the ETUC) but also, crucially, in their National Standardisation Bodies. As NSBs have voting rights, this is where real influence can be felt. Having trade union representatives at the national level contributing to standard-setting processes helps support the work of the ETUC at the European and international level. However, there is limited trade union involvement in this arena, which really limits the labour position at the standard development stage.

b) Trade unions and the implementation of standards

Once a standard is developed, drafted and published, it is then available for purchase by a company or organisation. What follows is the implementation stage. Whether they require certification or whether they are simply guidelines, standards are used in products and services and are implemented at the company/organisational level. In theory, it should be done with the involvement of the responsible worker representatives. However, when it comes to the meaningful implementation and application of standards, what is actually possible depends entirely on the context. Implementation looks different depending on the standard itself, but also on the country, the sector, the company and organisation, the branch and it can even vary within different company or organisational departments. In the strongest cases

IT IS IMPORTANT FOR TRADE UNIONS TO GET INVOLVED IN THE STANDARDISATION PROCESS, NOT ONLY AS OBSERVERS AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL (VIA THE ETUC) BUT ALSO, CRUCIALLY, IN THEIR NATIONAL STANDARDISATION BODIES

[26] https://www.etuc.org/en/etuc-stand-project-clean-cabin-air

(which are all too rare), the application of a standard in a company/organisation can be negotiated with worker representatives, but in most cases, they are fighting simply to be consulted about the introduction of the standard into a company/organisation. It is worth noting that in several EU countries, you will find elected worker representatives at the company level (following Directive 2002/14/EC on informing and consulting employees). Whether these reps are trade union members or not, trade unions play a key role in giving advice and support to these worker representatives on the implementation of standards.

The first port of call for the involvement of worker representatives in the implementation (via negotiation, when it comes to trade unions) of standards is the national labour law of that country. The degree to which worker representatives can participate in any implementation is entirely dependent on the legal system, but where information, consultation and participation with trade unions is foreseen by law, then union reps have a right to be informed and consulted on (or in some countries, the right to negotiate on) the EU and international standards that a company or organisation wants to adopt when they deal with health and safety or other issues that affect workers.

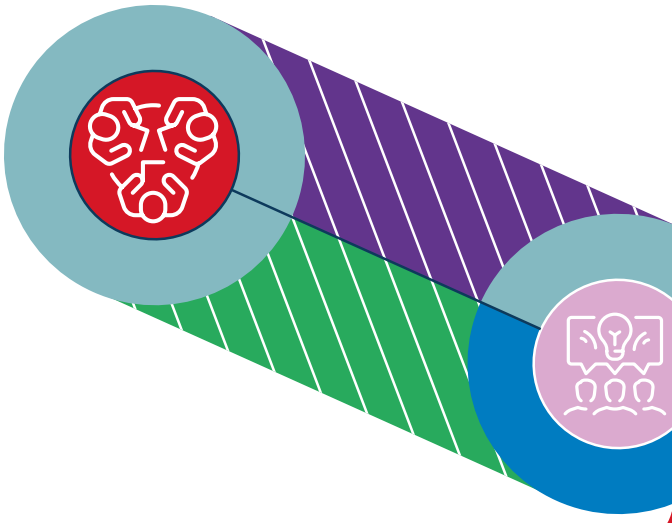
It is important, meaningful and, in some contexts, mandatory to have a negotiation with a trade union before implementing some types of standards, especially if it is a management or OSH standard. And even if it is not mandatory by law, trade unions should demand that the company/organisation starts a negotiation with trade union reps before they implement a management or OSH standard. But it is not just about negotiation, it is also about providing training for all workers on the standard before implementing it.

If your standard says something that contradicts the legislation, it is always the legislation that applies. So, if you have an employer who wants to implement a standard which is against their national legislation, the company/organisation cannot force workers to work according to that standard. However, someone has to notice that conflict between the standard and the legislation and trade unions are not always aware of the content of the standard and how it works in relation to national legislation.

In the European context, European Works Councils (EWCs) have an important role to play in the implementation of standards at the company level, particularly when it comes to HRM and OSH standards. EWCs are the only tool that European trade unionists and worker representatives have to speak on the strategies of multinationals, and they can even propose their own standards through CWAs or NSBs. If the implementation of a particular standard takes place at company level, international companies that are active in several countries in Europe (if they reach the relevant threshold of employment in the EU) have to inform and consult their EWCs about the impact that the implementation of any new standards will have on work regulation, working conditions and labour relations. In EWCs, worker representatives can then give their qualified feedback on management proposals and coordinate the involvement of workers (and their representatives) in the implementation processes.

Once it has been decided by a company or organisation that a standard is going to be introduced, trade union and worker representatives are the key to ensuring that the implementation of the standard in the workplace is 'worker-friendly'. To manage this task, worker representatives need to have the appropriate and necessary knowledge of the standard itself, an overview of its impact on labour relations and working conditions, and of the effective and efficient ways to gain and optimise their involvement in the standards' implementation process from the beginning, during its application and during its evaluation.

And finally, workers themselves also have an important role to play in the implementation process, particularly when it comes to their consent to standard-related data collection, data processing and data storage. It is then the task of worker representatives to protect workers from unfair pressure and persuasion from the management.



8. Challenges to trade union involvement in standardisation

As outlined throughout this booklet, there are many upsides to trade union involvement in standardisation. But there are significant challenges too. The first relates to the lack of transparency in standardisation. Although industry and standards-setting bodies claim that the process is transparent and inclusive, the reality tells a different story. In most cases, to simply read a standard, you have to pay to do so. In many countries, if you want to participate in the development of standards, you have to pay to join a technical committee. At the EU level, things have improved over the years, primarily with Annex III of EU Regulation 1025/2012, which foresees the funding of the participation of societal stakeholders in the standardisation process. But much more needs to be done to make the process fully open and inclusive.

This need for inclusivity is apparent in the National Standardisation Bodies. In Europe, NSBs are recognised by their respective national authorities as the principal legitimate space for the development of standards, but there have long been questions about their ability to safeguard the fair and balanced representation of all stakeholders, particularly trade unions. Despite the preamble of Regulation 1025/2012 on European Standardisation stating that "it is necessary to ensure that the role and the input of societal stakeholders in the development of standards [via NSBs] are strengthened, through the reinforced support of organisations representing consumers and environmental and social interests"[27], this doesn't always reflect the reality on the ground. Some NSBs charge a membership fee to participate in technical committees, while in other countries participation is free. Fees (and financial resources overall) have a significant influence on who can afford to be involved in the standard-setting process as participation fees can be a serious obstacle for less well-funded trade unions.

Effective participation in the standardisation process requires very specific skills, particularly in the areas of negotiation and communication. It is not enough for trade unions to be informed about standards; they also need training so that they can successfully use their knowledge to influence the process. It is a complicated topic with lots of technical jargon that can be confusing and intimidating to the uninitiated. Add to this the additional challenge of the fact that the main language of standards is English, and very technical English at that. As not all trade unionists at the national level are fluent English speakers, there needs to be a focus on language training, or engaging with and training trade union members and officials who already possess strong English language skills to work on standardisation. The ETUC organises national seminars to build awareness about standards and to train experts to participate in the drafting process of standards, as well as English courses for trade unionists working on standards, but more needs to be invested in skills development at all levels of trade union activity.

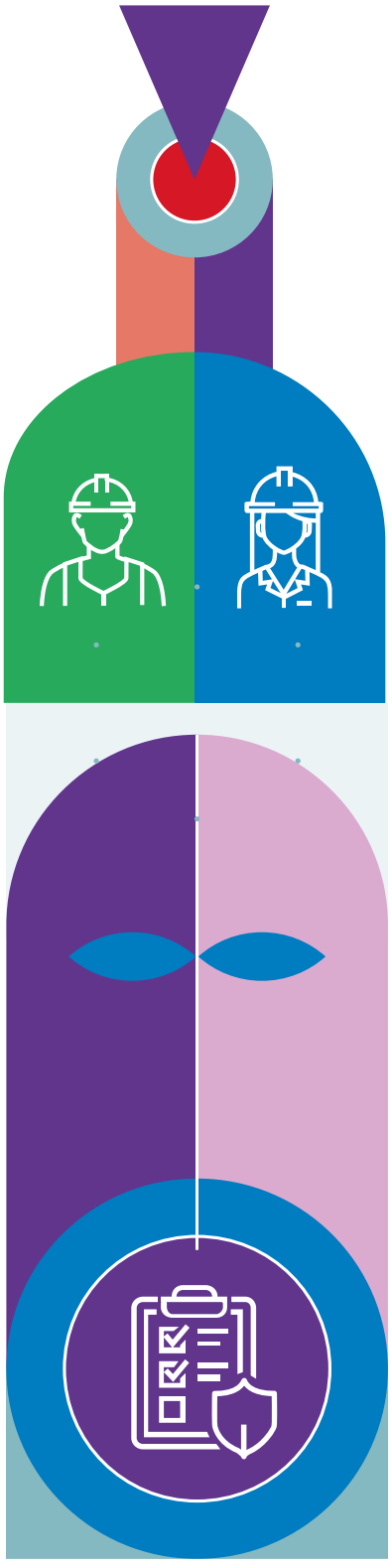
[27] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2012:316:0012:0033:EN:PDF

The general lack of awareness about standards and standardisation processes is a major inhibitor of trade union participation in this area. There is a small standards community, and it tends to be composed of people who have been working in the field for a very long time. It is also true that the people who are most interested in the issue of standardisation tend to be the health and safety reps because in most countries, they have a long history of involvement in the standardisation process. But when it comes to the new 'social standards', most trade unionist are completely unaware about what is going on in this area, or even that these types of standards exist at all. The knowledgeable participation of a cross-section of trade unionists is crucial to ensuring that organised labour can meaningfully affect the standardisation process.

Linked to this is the issue of diversity. Standardisation tends to be male-dominated with limited involvement of workers from underrepresented groups such as ethnic minority workers, disabled workers or LGBTQIA+ workers. More women and more workers of diverse backgrounds need to work on standards to improve the content by adding perspectives to the discussions that take place during the drafting process that might otherwise be missed. There are some new standards on equal opportunities being developed at ISO, including the recent 'ISO 53800 – Guidelines for the promotion and implementation of gender equality and women's empowerment', but trade unions need to keep a close eye on this expanding area of interest.

Most trade unions lack the time and most importantly, the money, to participate in standardisation work in any meaningful way. The financial cost of participating in the process is one thing – the actual standard documents cost money, as does travelling to the various international meetings – but many trade unions face difficulties in marshalling the internal human resources to dedicate people to do this work. In addition, the few trade unions involved in standardisation activities, may feel torn between focusing their attention on influencing the development of standards or trying to influence the implementation.

Finally, trade unions and worker representatives suffer from the lack of coordinated work. For example, EWCs do a lot of work that influences standards but they are not always plugged in to any standardisation processes. Additionally, awareness, communication and coordination between EWCs and trade unions on standardisation issues needs to be improved to prevent scant resources from being duplicated and wasted.



9. What can be done to strengthen trade union participation in standard-setting?

There are a number of steps that can be taken to increase the number of trade unionists involved in standardisation and to support their meaningful participation.

1

Ensure better participation in NSBs: In December 2022, the ETUC published the booklet *Trade Union Access to National Standardisation Committees*. Among the recommendations, it was suggested that: NSBs in Europe should implement uniform access conditions for trade union participation in national mirror committees; that NSBs should update their members lists at least annually to ensure that they have the relevant and current contact details for trade union representatives; and that NSBs should be proactive about sharing new standards proposals with societal stakeholders.

Crucially, national authorities should provide financial and technical support to trade unions at the national level, while waiving national committee membership costs to trade unions and other societal stakeholders, as they do not stand to make a profit from their participation.

2

Increase trade union awareness of standards: While demanding easier access to NSBs and EU standardisation, trade unions should also strengthen their efforts to raise awareness of standardisation being an increasingly critical tool for the direct and indirect shaping of labour relations at the EU and national levels. This can be achieved by introducing training for all trade union officials and worker representatives on the area of standards.

3

Develop trade union advisory skills: Speaking of training, worker representatives and trade union officials need to be trained on standard-setting procedures as well as the possibilities of involvement in the standards' implementation processes at their related entities. This includes training that will enable worker representatives to analyse the impact of the application of the relevant standards. Trade union officials should also be enabled to provide the necessary advice and support to workers on issues related to the implementation of standards.

4

Document practical experience: It is imperative that trade unions document the introduction and application of standards in order to create a databank of knowledge that can inform and inspire others working in the arena.

5

European Works Councils: EWC should call for the participation of worker representatives in the implementation of standardised guidelines and in the certification/auditing of management system standards as an issue for national worker information and consultation, and in the catalogue of consultation topics of companies and European Works Councils.

6

Alliance building: Trade unions should seek to build alliances with labour experts, academics, trade- and labour-related scientists and other experts, who should be activated for the participation in the development of standards.

7

Develop procedures: Trade unions need to develop procedures for the implementation of standards in companies. As previously mentioned, the implementation of standards at company, enterprise, and workplace levels will have impacts on labour relations and working conditions that may cause the necessity of defending, maintaining, amending, or reinforcing existing collective and works agreements. These activities require appropriate approaches and skills to ensure the development of productive efficiency that is needed to safeguard both economic success, employment, and a good and healthy work environment.

10. Conclusion

The simple aim of this booklet is to elicit some interest in the topic of standards, and hopefully encourage enthusiastic participation in the process, particularly at company/organisation level. In many ways, now is an exciting time to be involved in standardisation. The growth of new standards can be viewed as an opportunity for trade unions to find new avenues to improve the conditions of workers with their specific technical knowledge. And there are no better people to participate in the development and implementation of standards than the workers whose labour powers the industries that technical standards help to regulate.

But just as there is no one-size-fits-all approach to the standards, there is no limit to the ways in which trade unionists can be involved. If you are interested in learning or doing more after reading this publication, simply start by asking yourself: 'What do standards look like in the company/organisation where I work?' 'Is there anything that trade unions could do to enhance them?' And most importantly: 'How can I get involved?' Because it is always an ongoing process. Drafting the standard is just the first step.

It is true that trade unionists must keep a watchful eye on standards that affect labour issues and work in the technical committees which deal with such topics. But there is no one better than a trade unionist, one who has worked for many years with a machine, in a service or on a process, to develop safe and high-quality standards for the end users who are often also workers working with a machine, in a service or on a process. Ignoring standards can be self-defeating for worker representatives, as industry consultants are more than happy to write standards alone. The world is in a moment of great transition and more and more standards are going to be used to underpin these transitions, be it regarding the climate or digital transformation. If trade unions want these transitions to be just, then they will need to be involved when the first draft of the future is being written.

THERE IS NO ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL APPROACH TO THE STANDARDS, THERE IS NO LIMIT TO THE WAYS IN WHICH TRADE UNIONISTS CAN BE INVOLVED

Further resources

The ETUC's online homepage on standards: https://www.etuc.org/en/issue/standardisation

Working environment, standardisation and the EU – a joint publication by the Swedish national trade union centres, LO, TCO and Saco. Published in Swedish in 2006.

Trade union access to national standardisation committees, published by the ETUC in early 2023: https://www.etuc.org/sites/default/files/page/file/2023-05/Brochure%20Accesse%20Condition%20to%20national%20mirror%20committee_EN_v4.pdf

Trade Union Guide 'ISO 45001 - Using the new health and safety standard in the workplace' published by the ETUC in 2023: https://www.etuc.org/sites/default/files/page/file/2023-05/Brochure%20Accesse%20Condition%20to%20national%20mirror%20committee_EN_v4.pdf

Societal stakeholders and standards: a free online training course on standards: Societal stakeholders and standards (standards4all.eu)

Notes

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European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)
Boulevard du Jardin Botanique, 20
1000 Brussels
www.etuc.org

standards@etuc.org
etuc.org/en/issue/standardisation