



PERC PAN-EUROPEAN TRADE UNION COUNCIL CRE CONSEIL REGIONAL EUROPEEN  
BEPK ВСЕЕВРОПЕЙСКИЙ РЕГИОНАЛЬНЫЙ СОВЕТ

## **Statement on the COVID-19 crisis by the Pan-European Regional Council (PERC) of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), 1 April 2020**

The global COVID-19 crisis has affected the whole continent of Europe. Millions of people are or will be infected. Severe restrictions on freedom of movement and in the labour market have led to job losses mounting and businesses facing bankruptcy.

Decades of structural reform, compounded by austerity, have left public health and social protection systems in many countries struggling to cope. In worst cases, such as in Georgia where the healthcare has been completely privatized, the state found itself a hostage of a private healthcare; it has to pay enormous amounts of money to private sector to address preventive or existing challenge. Low wages and insecure employment have presented many infectious people with the choice of spreading the disease or acute poverty.

In the long-term, we need to learn again the lessons of the Global Financial Crisis. We need an end to neo-liberalism, structural reform and austerity. We need democracies that put people first. We need a new social contract, with a universal safety net of labour rights, decent wages and social protection for all workers, and adequately funded public services, including health care for all, free at the point of need.

For now, much of Europe is locked down. National governments have – sometimes belatedly - adopted strict measures, closing borders and factories, stopping cultural and sporting activities and shutting schools. While necessary, these measures have short-term impacts on workers' wages and will have a longer-term impact on economies and societies.

Many workers are requested to stay at home and many, especially women, need to care for children not at school, part of a pandemic-related expansion of unpaid care work. Some can work remotely, others benefit from social protection coverage or part-time employment schemes. Many others are just laid-off or left without incomes to sustain their families or to pay for housing or communal services. Women are more at risk of domestic abuse, and migrant workers and refugees face the dual challenge of losing incomes and not being able to return to their homes. Healthcare workers – disproportionately female – are overstretched and at enhanced risk of exposure, with insufficient personal protective equipment. Many other workers in distribution, retail, care and emergency services – also disproportionately female - are also at risk and deserve our respect.

Countries with developed and inclusive economies, even where challenged by structural reform and austerity, have been able to enact economic stimuli, pump money into health services and maintain wages, particularly in the Northern and Western Europe. Pressed by or

in collaboration with trade unions, some countries have provided extra sick pay, wage subsidies for employed and self-employed workers, short-time working and even mortgage and rent relief<sup>1</sup>. Rather more have given businesses support through subsidies and tax rebates and cheaper loans<sup>2</sup>.

But too many countries in Europe are too indebted, their social protection and public sector inadequately funded, precarious employment and widespread poverty rife and collective bargaining and social dialogue underdeveloped. Those countries will not be able to cope with the outcomes of COVID-19.

And while there are responsible businesses in Europe and the world<sup>3</sup> who understand the need for both anti-virus measures and the need to sustain economies, to support the societies and citizens and to contribute to recovery there are also many greedy ones, who relinquish any responsibilities by just dismissing people, by forcing workers to work in unsafe and insecure conditions or by proposing the suspension of labour rights. In Croatia unions have successfully fought off such hypocritical and unconscionable proposals but we need to remain vigilant and show solidarity where further attacks are proposed. In Poland the recently adopted bill aiming to tackle the COVID-19 crisis introduced regulations which are not related to the crisis but aim to restrict social dialogue and interfere with the autonomy of social partners.

The global COVID19 crisis requires a global response. While there are certain positive signals from the G20 and IMF<sup>4</sup>, even the European Union has so far failed to adopt a sufficiently coordinated approach<sup>5</sup>.

The Pan-European Regional Council that represents trade unions from Reykjavik to Vladivostok reaffirms the unity of European trade union movement, reiterates the call for solidarity in facing the health, economic and humanitarian crisis that plagues the continent, and demands concentrated and consolidated efforts from national and multilateral authorities, businesses and unions.

We call on national governments to:

- contain the spread of the disease, while respecting fundamental freedoms, especially as social pressures mount;
- provide more and adequate support for healthcare services and all women and men on the frontlines

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ituc-csi.org/putting-people-first>

<sup>2</sup> Some examples from ITUC and ETUC available at (to be completed)

<https://www.ituc-csi.org/covid-19-best-country-responses>

<sup>3</sup> Link to ITUC-IOE, ITUC-ICC:

[https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/20200323\\_joint\\_ioe-ituc\\_statement\\_on\\_covid-19.pdf](https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/20200323_joint_ioe-ituc_statement_on_covid-19.pdf);

<https://www.ituc-csi.org/ituc-icc-covid19>

<sup>4</sup> Link to ITUC responses:

<https://www.ituc-csi.org/letter-g20-covid19>

<https://www.ituc-csi.org/g20-summit-shows-global-leadership>

<https://www.ituc-csi.org/letter-from-kristalina-georgieva>

<sup>5</sup> Link on ETUC responses:

<https://www.etuc.org/en/trade-unions-and-coronavirus>

- guarantee healthcare support accessible to all people now and in future;
- introduce economic packages through social dialogue to prevent business collapse and unemployment, to maintain income levels for all workers, to sustain and extend social protection systems and to develop temporary employment protection to allow all workers including those in atypical and precarious employment to be adequately protected;
- in particular to provide decent incomes for employees, self-employed and platform workers, sick pay from day one, and help with housing costs;
- maintain vital supply chains through keeping open borders for the movement of goods and supplies at the same time providing transport workers with adequate protection;
- give special attention to the needs of those women facing increased risks of domestic violence; and
- to respect the rights of migrant workers by allowing them to stay in their host countries and to treat them as local citizens in terms of access to all social and employment rights.

We call on international authorities, including the European Union and International Financial Institutions, to:

- co-operate on measures required to stem the disease, including sharing information, medical expertise, technology and supplies, and personal protective equipment;
- extend financial support to economies in need with no conditions but that they will use those resources to fund public health services and income support for workers;
- inject sufficient money into the global economy to sustain demand and supply; and
- work with social partners to ensure that measures taken meet the needs of workers and businesses of all sizes.

We call on businesses and employers to:

- work with unions to ensure that their workers' rights, jobs and incomes are maintained, regardless of the type and form of employment, including those on insecure contracts;
- support the fight against the disease by switching production where possible to produce medical and personal protective equipment;
- desist from lobbying for the reduction or relaxation of employment protection;
- provide workers with personal protective equipment and other measures which reduce the spread of the virus in the workplaces; and
- allow for better co-operation with trade unions at the shop floor level to protect workers.

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