



## **Activities of European Social Partners and their national member organisations in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic**

### **Joint employers' contribution to the SPC 2020 Annual Report**

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European Social Partners and their member organisations across Europe have been actively involved in creating and implementing measures to soften the economic and social impact of the Covid crisis and the lockdown. They were also active in preparing economies to gradually open up and businesses to restart activities in a secure way.

#### **1.1. European Social Partners**

Over the last months, the European cross-industry social partners have contributed regularly to the EU response to the crisis from dealing with the emergency, exiting the lockdown, and more recently, the recovery plan.

European cross-industry employers – BusinessEurope, CEEP and SMEUnited - have engaged in a variety of initiatives and activities in the last months, with their respective trade union counterparts, aiming to inform the European response to the crisis based on their real time analysis of economic and social trends deriving from the Covid-19 crisis.

A key priority for cooperation between the European Commission, the cross-industry social partners and national governments in the coming months is to ensure that short-time work schemes are well coordinated at European level and well performing in all EU Member States. They should be lifted in a flexible manner, adapted to the changing reality of containment and other sanitary measures impacting on the functioning of the labour markets. The social protection committee has a particular role to monitor the situation at the national level from the perspective of the functioning of social protection systems.

More info:

- Social Partners' input ahead of the videoconference of the members of the European Council on 23 April 2020: <https://www.buinesseurope.eu/publications/video-conference-members-european-council-23-april-2020-input-european-social-partners>
- BusinessEurope proposals for a European Economic Recovery Plan of 30 April 2020: <https://www.buinesseurope.eu/publications/buinesseurope-proposals-european-economic-recovery-plan>
- CEEP relevant papers on Covid: <https://www.ceep.eu/ceep-response-to-the-covid-19/>
- SMEUnited website – the Covid dedicated part: <https://smeunited.eu/news/updates-on-covid-19>

## 1.2. National member organisations

National social partners were very active both during the lockdown (mid-March-May) as well as in the re-opening phase (May-June).

Activities in the lockdown phase:

- providing **information services** for their members ("hot lines", some of them accessible 24/24, call centres, internal task-force), usually on-line, to explain introduced measures as well as practical aspects of implementing them - Cyprus, Greece, Poland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, France, Austria, Estonia, Bulgaria
- elaborating a **joint Common Regulatory Protocol for measures to combat and contain the spread of the Covid-19 virus at the workplace** and assistance to members in its implementation – Italy
- concluding **agreement** with the Extraordinary Commissioner for the Emergency **to facilitate the supply of face-masks** to industrial companies – Italy
- **promoting smart working** to prevent the widespread of Covid -19 at the workplaces - Italy
- organising **on-line meetings with policy-makers** from relevant ministries to facilitate understanding of the introduced measures - Luxembourg, Poland, Italy, Portugal, Cyprus, Estonia, Bulgaria
- providing **trainings and webinars** to discuss available support measures, for example suspension or reduction of social security contribution in case of short-time work schemes – the Netherlands, Cyprus, Poland, France, Italy, Estonia
- conducting **surveys** addressed to companies to help them to analyse the situation and plan the relevant measures - Bulgaria, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Austria
- setting up **dedicated sections on their websites** to provide members regularly with information from relevant ministries (i.e. health), institutions (i.e. national institute of social security) or international institutions (WHO) – Bulgaria, Germany, Italy, Cyprus, Portugal, Austria, Estonia
- maintaining **regular contact with relevant ministries** to ensure that employers' voice is heard in designing emergency measures (Italy, Austria, Bulgaria); specific measures: delaying, reducing or completely suspending social security contributions in case of short-time work schemes (France, Poland, Belgium, Estonia), activating and adjusting special Covid- related safety nets – Italy, or changing rules for employer contribution to financing short-term work schemes (Poland, Norway)
- **designing changes** in the occupation pension schemes so employees do not lose their accumulated rights during furlough schemes - UK, or short-term schemes - Norway
- **temporary exoneration of the employer social security:** for enterprises over 250 employees and from sectors the most impacted by the crisis (tourism, HORECA, sport, culture) – France; for employers from certain regions and hiring workers with open-ended contracts - Southern Italy
- **tweaking rules for acquiring pension rights** to ensure that periods of short-term work are taken into consideration as well as maintaining for such workers the social benefits foreseen in case of invalidity or death (*prévoyance*) - France
- **re-directing funds from bipartite social funds** to implement immediate social relief measures based on social partners' agreement - Italy
- contributing to **simplify procedure and entry conditions for economic unemployment** (*chômage économique*) for workers - Belgium
- introducing **special childcare allowance** for parents taking care of kinds aged 8 and younger when nurseries, kindergartens and schools were closed - Poland, extending the eligibility for paid leave from 10 to 20 days – Norway, or extending the scope of parental leave – Belgium
- **changing conditions to qualify for sick leave** – UK, or tweaking sickness allowance to enable paying out special "social allowance" for parents taking care of their children - France
- providing **a medical tele-consultation service for workers** by the bipartite organisms - France
- organising **donations** to purchase necessary material and protection equipment for healthcare sector – Greece, or donating **materials** - Bulgaria

- employers' **legislative initiative** to increase financing of occupational medicine – Poland
- discussing possible measures for **social security protection for the self-employed** – France.

Activities in the “re-opening phase”:

- drafting **practical guides on returning to work in a safe and healthy way**, often with some sections dedicated for specific sectors, for example transport, commerce, office work - Belgium, Bulgaria, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Greece, Poland, Norway, Spain, updating existing Common Regulatory Protocol – Italy, or separate documents for specific regions or even areas - France
- providing **on-going advisory services** related to the health and safety rules and protection measures for employees, i.e. social distancing, wearing masks in the workplace, installing plastic shields - Luxembourg, UK, Poland, Portugal, Belgium, Italy, Austria, Norway
- developing a **guidance for completing mandatory risk assessment and evaluation** (in cooperation with Labour Inspectorate and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment) – the Netherlands, Cyprus, Norway
- organising **webinars on Covid-19 and health and safety protection measures** and issues related to employers' liability in a “new normal” - the Netherlands, Italy
- on-going **monitoring of the governmental decisions** that impact business and preparing relevant communication and/or activities – Estonia, “duty officer” in Cyprus
- establishing and promoting **rules to facilitate leave of workers in case of extraordinary family obligations** resulting from closing kindergartens and schools - Greece
- **discussing internal sick pay policies** – the budgets were planned for a “normal” year, but the sick pay cost has increased significantly – UK, Estonia
- **discussing consequences of short-term work schemes to the defined-contribution pension schemes** (no work means no contribution) and designing “lifeboat schemes” to sponsor employers to close the gap in contributions – UK
- on-going discussion on **financing of the quarantine periods or testing of employees** who are Covid-negative, but are in a risk group (i.e. have travelled to red zone or were in contact with the Covid-positive person) – UK
- cooperation with a test laboratory for Covid-19 tests - Austria
- submitting **proposals for a structural reform of the national system of social safety nets**, aimed namely at introducing a fairer and more consistent system of protection in case of loss and/or suspension of employment, based on active labour market policies – approach – Italy.

In conclusion, from the beginning of the pandemics in Europe employer organisations in all member states have been in regular contacts with respective governments and social security institutions. They have been contributing to/or co-designing emergency measures. They have been disseminating information about the adopted measures among businesses - often also non-members - as well as have been guiding them in implementation. They have become “focal points” for businesses and a go-between in their contacts with national administration, which facilitated implementation of the emergency measures and their optimal design. Last but not least, they have largely contributed to drafting national recovery plans and exit strategies.