

Covid-19 Crisis: Political Statement

26th UNI Europa Executive Committee – 6-7 October 2020

“Forward Through Collective Bargaining”, the theme of the 5th UNI Europa Conference, is our inspiration for dealing with the Covid-19 crisis. Rather than allowing the pandemic to undermine workers’ rights, we must turn it around to advance a workers’ Europe with and through strong collective bargaining.

Covid-19 has caused a European and global sanitary, economic and, most importantly, social and human crisis. Workers in services have been affected differently. Some have not been able to work at all, in tourism in particular. White-collar workers have been forced to work from home. Essential workers have been on the frontline despite the health risk in commerce, care, cleaning, finance, hairdressing, private security, post and logistics.

Indeed, it is services workers that have kept our society functioning throughout the crisis. It has brought to the fore the importance of well-established services sectors for both the economy and society. Once the pandemic has been overcome, we must ensure that the services sectors will not again be hollowed out by austerity policies with services workers paying the price. Instead, our aim is: decent pay and working conditions for all. Achieving this, is central to reversing the inequality in our societies and across the world that has become so evident during the crisis. It is time to overcome years of austerity policies and 40 years of neo-liberalism.

The lasting effect of the pandemic will be the more immediate and greater impact of current transformational trends on our economies and societies. It is digitalisation and the climate emergency in the first place. Other trends include the outsourcing of ever more functions combined with a shrinking core workforce, the loosening of the employment relationship and a rise in precarious forms of work. The crisis has given a boost to the market power of Amazon and other Big Tech companies to the detriment of competitors, workers and society at large. Due to the acceleration brought about by Covid-19, we have less time to address today’s challenges. We must slow the speed of change so that our societies can manage.

Countries, industries and companies with strong unions are more resilient in crisis situations and in times of rapid change. Covid-19 has given us renewed proof of this. Collective bargaining and social dialogue are tried-and-tested methods for mastering transformation. Acting together, trade unions and employers – the social partners – have the most direct knowledge on what is changing in their industries. They are thus in the best position to act with the required speed and continuity to achieve fair outcomes and shared prosperity. This is at the core of Social Europe. It is the competitive advantage of Europe. It is our strength to lessen the lasting fall-out of this crisis.

The pandemic reconfirms UNI Europa's policies for strengthening collective bargaining, indeed the Covid-19 crisis brings about more urgency and opens new opportunities on this path.

- 1) The services sectors employ two thirds of the workforce and provide two thirds of GDP in Europe. They are not only the biggest part of the economy, but its backbone. They provide the essential framework that keeps the economy and society moving. We call for a **massive and lasting shift of public investment to the services sectors**. We need urgent steps to stimulate consumption allowing workers to help refloat the economy. Money must be put into their pockets to spend – not only to overcome the pandemic, but also to alleviate the upheaval being caused by the transition to a digital and climate neutral economy. Public investment is essential to smoothen the substantive restructuring the services sectors face. The focus must be on creating quality jobs, not least through upskilling, and fostering a general pay rise in Europe, in particular for services workers. Europe needs to build a sustainable, future-oriented services infrastructure with a distinctly social perspective.
- 2) There will be no fair economy in the aftermath of the pandemic if it will not radically revalue essential work and the needs of **essential workers**. Many of them who have kept our communities running during the crisis have been overlooked and underpaid for far too long. Now is the time to change this. We are calling for “a new normal” for essential workers. Decent jobs mean that employers around the world must respect workers’ essential rights: a wage with dignity, safe jobs, paid sick leave, union representation, collective bargaining and essential status during times of crisis. We call on the EU to pave the way by ending state promotion of unfair competition on wages, of wage dumping. The first step is a revision of the public procurement directive so that only those companies that are party to a collective agreement can bid.
- 3) The pandemic illustrates that in times of crisis, when resources are strained and institutional capacity is limited, the **structural inequalities women, youth, ethnic minorities and other discriminated groups** face are further amplified. They are affected in terms of employment, access to health services and social protection as well as protection from violence. Hard fought rights and benefits have come under threat. As unions, we aim to help rectify long-standing inequalities and stopping any roll-back by design or not. Gender equality is top on the agenda of collective bargaining. In the context of the EU, we call for swift adoption of the pay transparency directive and ratification of ILO Violence and Harassment Convention (no. 190).
- 4) Haphazard emergency arrangements should not become the way to organise **remote work**. Instead, we call on employers to regulate it with unions through collective agreements. The EU and governments should start working on an updated legal framework and ensure proper enforcement. Working time laws with a supplementary right to disconnect must be respected. Remote work must be voluntary for employees. There should be no principal difference between the obligations of employers towards employees working remotely or in the office. Any surveillance must be both transparent and respect privacy. It must be clear that remote work cannot be a slippery slope from standard employment to more precarious forms. Remote work emphasises the need for a EU right for unions to access a company, including virtually and in a transnational context. Employers must have the obligation to provide appropriate facilities for unions to meet with the workforce during paid working hours for purposes of organising, representing and collective bargaining.
- 5) Today’s crisis has **accelerated restructuring processes** already under way in the services industry and its companies. Too many managers evade their obligations to abide by EU workers’ information, consultation and participation rights. We call on the EU and governments to ensure that relevant legislation, like the EWC directive, are

strictly enforced and workers' representatives are in a position to exercise their rights. On top of this, we call for a revised and strengthened EU framework for transnational company restructuring that promotes and supports negotiations between trade unions and companies at all the appropriate levels. We call upon companies to engage with trade unions in collective bargaining and social dialogue to anticipate change and manage restructuring together. With such an approach, Europe will be able to master the transitions in the services sectors in a socially sustainable, fair and forward looking way.

- 6) **Amazon's** power is unchecked and the Covid-19 crisis has accelerated its growth. We call on the Commission to hold Amazon to account, up to and including structural separation. We cannot allow Amazon's many anticompetitive business practices to decimate our services industries and in particular our high streets. Amazon is the prime culprit. Yet, the likes of Google, Facebook and Apple are not far behind. We call for EU legislation that protects our economies for good by regulating and constraining all online platforms with significant market power. The EU's digital services act must define a new framework that fosters quality services while ensuring a level playing field for all market participants guaranteeing workers' rights, regardless of whether companies operate within the traditional economy or the e-economy. The biggest profiteers of the crisis must pay their fair share so that countries have the resources to both cope with the Covid-19 fallout and organise the digital and climate transitions in a way that benefits the many, not the few.
- 7) The pandemic is not over yet. **Workers' health and safety** must be properly protected, including regarding mental and physical health issues as well as all forms of work related violence resulting from the Covid-19 situation. Personal protective equipment (PPE) must be available – shortages in one of the most developed regions globally is manifest policy failure. Throughout Europe, Covid-19 must be designated as an occupational disease for all workers that are disproportionately exposed to infection risks. Trade unions must be fully involved in the design, implementation and monitoring of protective measures as well as return to work policies – at national level, through EWCs and transnational trade union alliance.
- 8) Sectoral **social dialogue** has proved its value during the crisis. Trade unions and employers have joined force across Europe to develop and agree on joint risk assessments, guidance and demands fine-tuned to the specific situations in an industry. We are committed to continue to enhance this success beyond the crisis. We call on the EU to foster sectoral social dialogue at European level by including the social partners from very early on in policymaking processes relating to the world of work. We need a commitment for resourcing capacity building of trade unions, employers' associations and collective bargaining, in particular in Central and Eastern Europe. This includes dedicated funding that is channelled through the European sectoral social partners.
- 9) We join the ETUC in its assessment that emergency measures put in place so far by the EU and governments have indeed protected workers, companies and public services from massive disruption. However, there have been significant shortcomings in the timely implementation, adequacy, universality of coverage and access, and proper involvement of social partners in the process. This needs to be rectified. Europe needs solidarity, both between and within countries. We demand EU intervention that obliges governments to require companies, that benefit from financial support and income compensation schemes, to negotiate with trade unions and workers' representatives regarding restructuring and laying-off of workers. We expect a clear commitment by the EU that **national recovery plans** will not be subject to damaging fiscal conditions and austerity measures. At the same time, companies must not receive emergency state aid if they pay dividends or executive bonuses, share

buybacks, do not comply with taxation rules and obligations, and, most importantly for us, are not party to a collective agreement. Europe must protect jobs, not shareholders and bosses.

- 10) Trade unions and collective bargaining are central to the efforts to tackle the pandemic. We will oppose any attempts by governments to undermine these collective and individual workers' rights under the cover of emergency legislation. We will oppose any attempts by the EU, governments or companies to use the crisis to reduce wages and working conditions.

UNI Europa will pursue this agenda together with our affiliates, our sectors and groups so that the Covid-19 crisis becomes a turning point for strengthening trade unions and collective bargaining, for achieving a society in Europe that is fairer and more equal.

We want to lift the bottom through social protection and minimum living wages for all.

We want to enlarge the middle through sectoral collective bargaining with the support of employers, governments and civil society.

We want to limit the greed at the top by forcing the 1% to pay their fair share and respect democracy in politics and at work.