



NICOLAS SCHMIT

MEMBER OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION
JOBS AND SOCIAL RIGHTS

Rue de la Loi, 200
B-1049 Brussels
Tel. +32-2 295 00 90
Nicolas.Schmit@ec.europa.eu

Brussels,
Ares (2020) 2339920

Dear Mr Goudriaan,
Dear leaders of the European Trade Union Federations,

Thank you for your letter of 27 March 2020, sharing your concerns in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

Commissioners Thierry Breton, Stella Kyriakides and Janez Lenarcic have entrusted me with a response on their behalf.

First of all, allow me to convey my sincere gratitude and admiration to all frontline workers who relentlessly continue to fight the pandemic and ensure that essential goods and services are provided across the European Union.

I would like to assure you that the Commission is using all tools available to tackle the COVID-19 crisis, in close and continuous cooperation with Member States.

I fully share your opinion regarding the need of ensuring health and safety of workers in these times of public health crisis. More than ever, strict respect and application of the national laws transposing the EU rules on safety and health at work is of utmost importance. This is the case with the general obligation for employers to assess risks

/.....

Mr Jan Willem Goudriaan
General Secretary
European Federation of Public Service Unions
40 rue Joseph II, box 5
B-1000 Brussels
iwgoudriaan@epsu.org

and put in place adequate preventive and protective measures. To assist employers in preventing the spread of COVID-19 at the workplace, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work has recently published "COVID-19: guidance for the workplace".¹ Among other things, it emphasises the importance of informing workers and their representatives about the contingency and business continuity plan. The Agency, in close cooperation with the Commission, has also published EU Guidance for a safe return to the workplace². This guidance contains practical advice for employers and companies and represents a relevant EU contribution to the recovery process.

With regard to your question on full and prompt availability of personal protective equipment, the Commission is advancing four accelerated procedures for joint procurement of medical countermeasures: two for personal protective equipment – masks, gloves, goggles, face-shields, and overalls – as well as one for medical ventilators and one for laboratory supplies, including testing kits. Following the European Council of 26 March 2020, the Joint Procurement Agreement was also opened to the Western Balkans' countries. They can participate in future joint procurement procedures once they have formally joined the Joint Procurement Agreement.

In addition, we have recently modified the Union Civil Protection Mechanism legislation to allow the creation of a strategic stockpiling under the rescEU reserve, including medical equipment such as ventilators, personal protective equipment, reusable masks, vaccines and therapeutics and laboratory supplies. The Commission will finance 100% of the costs of the stockpiling and will manage the distribution of the equipment to ensure it goes where it is needed most.

As for efforts to step up the production of personal protective equipment, since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak the Commission has been actively working with industry to promote a massive ramp-up of overall production of personal protective equipment and medical devices in the EU and is providing the necessary guidance to facilitate this. We have reached out to companies operating in the EU with the aim of identifying available stocks and mapping the manufacturing facilities and capacities across the EU. Many companies are already increasing their production capacity and creating new production lines, and the Commission is helping them to ensure not only that this is done quickly but also that their products comply with all necessary safety standards.

.../....

¹ [https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/COVID-19: guidance for the workplace#See](https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/COVID-19:_guidance_for_the_workplace#See)

² [https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/COVID-19: Back to the workplace - Adapting workplaces and protecting workers](https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/COVID-19:_Back_to_the_workplace_-_Adapting_workplaces_and_protecting_workers)

On 13 March 2020, the Commission issued Recommendation (EU) 2020/403 on the conformity assessment and market surveillance procedures to facilitate the rapid uptake of new products on the EU market. It urged notified bodies to prioritise the conformity assessment activities for all newly submitted requests by manufacturers of protective equipment. Related guidance was swiftly published. In addition, upon request of the Commission, on 20 March 2020 the European Committee for Standardization and the European Committee for Electrotechnical Standardization made all the relevant European harmonised standards for protective equipment freely and fully available for all interested companies. All the above measures have been put in place in close collaboration with the Member States.

Furthermore, to prevent any disruptions in transport, including to medical supplies and equipment, to keep freight moving freely and efficiently across the EU, on 23 March, the Commission issued practical advice on the implementation of 'green lanes' – border crossings open to all freight vehicles carrying goods, where any checks or health screenings should not take more than 15 minutes. The Commission also called on EU Member States to support air cargo operations during the coronavirus crisis and presented new guidance to keep essential transport flows moving, including those of medical supplies and personnel.³

With regard to your broader concern about impact of the current crisis on the labour market, in its Communication of 13 March 2020 on a coordinated economic response to the COVID-19 Outbreak [COM(2020) 112 final], the Commission stressed the need to adequately protect workers from the risk of unemployment and loss of income. In particular, it recommended to Member States making use of short-time work schemes and suggested the adoption of other measures such as temporary extensions of sick pay or changes to unemployment benefit arrangements to support households' incomes.

Furthermore, on 2 April 2020, the Commission put forward a proposal to establish a new 'European instrument for temporary support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency' (SURE), specifically designed to help protect jobs and workers affected by the coronavirus pandemic. When adopted, SURE will allow the provision of financial assistance up to EUR 100 billion for the financing of short-time work schemes and similar measures aimed at supporting employment.

I am pleased that Member States have adopted a broad range of measures to support workers, the self-employed and their families: more comprehensive sickness benefits, short-time work schemes, temporary cash transfers, new types of leave to support parents when schools and childcare centres are closed, etc. These schemes should

.../....


³ https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/travel-and-transportation_en#ensuringthefreeflowofgoodsandservices

preserve employment, help individuals to follow health advice and self-isolate, and smoothen their income during the pandemic. This is critical to save lives and maintain the living standards of the affected population. The Commission supports Member States with all the means at its disposal and monitors the impact, effectiveness and adequacy of these schemes, paying particular attention to the self-employed and the non-standard workers.

Finally, the Commission is convinced that a well- functioning social dialogue is more than ever crucial in times of crisis. It is key for developing and implementing effective responses at company, sectoral and national level. Social partners' consultation and involvement in policy-making is an irreplaceable tool to ensure a balanced crisis management and a sustainable recovery. I have encouraged Member States to work closely with social partners and will keep doing so. Tripartite agreements for providing guidance on how to combat the COVID-19 outbreak have been achieved in several Member States. I am also aware of social partners' joint initiatives across the EU that are reinforcing governments' efforts and confirming the unique role social partners can play.

I thank you for your efforts and count on your support to overcome together the current crisis and enable recovery.

Yours sincerely,



Nicolas Schmit