

EPSU supports timely agreement on digitalisation



(Brussels, 22 June 2020) Following consultation of Executive Committee members, EPSU has voted in the ETUC to support a new cross-sector agreement on digitalisation that covers public service workers.

ETUC and the three employers endorsed the agreement and published it Monday 22 June.

The agreement is timely as hundreds of thousands of workers across Europe have been switched to telework at short notice, often without the proper procedures in relation to health and safety and equipment. There is concern now among trade unions that employers will try to make this and other emergency measures more permanent.

The digitalisation agreement underlines that any new working arrangements, changes to working conditions or work relations linked to digitalisation should be

subject to a joint process of assessment and action by employers and trade unions. It also confirms that action should be taken in relation to any existing digital tools or processes “where there are concerns about the impacts on working conditions and health and safety needing urgent attention.”

Importantly the section of the agreement on process also says that: “Workers’ representatives will be provided with such facilities and information as necessary to effectively engage in the different stages of the process.”

The agreement provides for measures to avoid job losses and on surveillance and confirms that all public sector workers are covered. There are key sections on continual learning and training and transparency and control of artificial intelligence.

Details of the agreement

The five main sections of the agreement cover:

Jointly managed process (pages 4-6)

Digital skills and securing employment (7-9)

Modalities of connecting and disconnecting (9-10)

Artificial intelligence and guaranteeing the human in control principle (10-11)

Respect of human dignity and surveillance (12)

The section on process is quite detailed but underlines the fact that employers and trade unions should work together to address issues arising from digitalisation covering the broad areas of work organisation, work content and skills, working conditions and work relations.

The paragraphs on digital skills and securing employment underline the importance of timely information and consultation processes and anticipation of change and skills needs. It highlights the importance of delivering employment security and better working conditions and underlines that equal opportunities should ensure all workers benefit from training provision.

The modalities of connecting and disconnecting emphasise the importance of a preventative health and safety approach that ensures proper application of all relevant working time regulations and rules in collective agreements. This section includes a formulation that focuses on minimising out-of-hours contact and no obligation on the part of the worker to respond if contacted.

The section on artificial intelligence makes clear that there has to be a human-centred approach and that it should be about augmenting human capacities and not about replacing workers. It also stresses the need for transparency and that ultimately there should be the scope for appeals against decisions made by artificial intelligence.

The next section covers human dignity and surveillance and gives a specific role here for worker representatives in ensuring that data protection rules are properly applied. The final part of the agreement includes the standard provisions for implementing an autonomous, cross-sector, social partner agreement, clarifying the protection for existing and better provision at national and local level.

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