Overlooked: migrant workers in the COVID-19 crisis



(17 April 2020) Migrant workers in Europe are on the frontline of the response to the COVID-19 crisis. Now more than ever, the crucial contribution of migrant workers to support European economies, public services and fill labour shortages is crystal clear. These workers are to be found in those sectors most hit by the crisis agriculture, domestic and care work, public healthcare at all levels, food industry, construction, tourism, transport) putting their lives at risk for the sake of all of us. (Their work is essential; however, they are the forgotten ones.

All migrant workers, and particularly the undocumented, are among the least protected. They have always faced a number of challenges, but due to the COVID-19 crisis those problems have been exacerbated, and an urgent European response is needed. They suffer problems related to their working and employment conditions, access to sick pay or unemployment or social benefits, personal protective equipment such as facial masks, public healthcare and housing, as well

as to their residence and work permits (1).

Across Europe, migrant workers are disproportionately employed in precarious work and employment conditions, therefore are particularly likely to need to keep working despite the risks of contracting Coronavirus not least in outsourced jobs including in the public sector. Their right to stay in the country where they live and work depends on their job. Losing their job means losing their income and for some, their accommodation, as well as the impossibility to access any social benefits. For undocumented migrant workers, meanwhile, there is no choice as they do not qualify for any social protection, sick pay or unemployment benefits so are forced to keep working risking their health and that of those around them.

Moreover, it is very likely undocumented migrants will not go to hospital if they contract Coronavirus until it is in an advanced stage, due to the risks of data being shared with immigration authorities or the fear of being reported to the police. In some countries, like in the UK, is also due to the high costs of using the national health service. At the same time, some governments are taking measures to remove barriers to accessing healthcare services for undocumented people, and/or regularise them as in Portugal.

Due to the crisis, the workload that some migrant workers face is immense, and regulations related to social distancing and hygiene measures are often not enforced at their workplaces. This problem will have to be carefully resolved in the next phase, i.e. during the coexistence with the virus. During that period measures, procedures and protocols will have to be put in place at the European level to minimize any additional risk of contagion. Migrant domestic and home care workers, the large majority of whom are women, are highly affected by social distancing measures in employers' homes. The containment measures imposed by governments expose them even to the loss of their accommodation, as they often live in their employers' homes. Agriculture migrant workers, live segregated in deplorable housing; rudimental shelters built in isolated and overcrowded slums without sanitary facilities with a considerable risk of those informal settlements becoming hotspots for the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, migrants are facing administrative obstacles related to the procedures for issuing or renewing their residence and/or working permits. Some administrations, particularity in Italy and Spain, have suddenly closed due to the

pandemic leaving migrants in a state of uncertainty with regard to their applications. In the Italian case, given the impossibility of accessing relevant offices, migrants with residence permits that are expiring, that have expired or are in the process of renewal have been automatically extended until the 15th of June. Digital applications are being made possible; however, a large part of the migrant population does not have the resources, access to a computer and/or necessary skills to do so.

There are also migrants who, having travelled to their countries of origin around the period when borders closed, are now unable to return to their home countries with the obvious risk of losing their jobs. In addition, if the permit is expiring or has expired, they risk not being able to return to their countries of residence.

Trade unions across Europe are fighting to protect all migrant workers, by providing information and keeping their services available for them – online or by phone. For example, Immigration Advice centres in Germany, have established special hotlines due to the increase need of advice on dismissals, temporary work terminations and loss of income. The instrument of short-time work is currently used in Germany to avoid mass layoffs. For workers in the low-wage sector, however, short-time working benefits are often not sufficient to cover their cost of living, representing a major concern for trade unions.

Last but not least, a growing number of cases of racist and xenophobic incidents against migrants as a consequence of the portrayal of the COVID-19 as an Asian virus have emerged. Chinese people and people perceived to be Chinese have been physical attacked and hospitalised. It is particularly important that public authorities make every effort to confront xenophobia. COVID-19 does not discriminate, and nor should our response.

The only way to come out of this crisis is to do it together and that NO ONE is left behind and that everyone’s right to public healthcare is respected without discrimination. ETUC, therefore calls on the EU and national governments to show solidarity and to take the necessary measures to protect ALL migrant workers and in particular to:

- ensure pay sick leave for all workers, including migrant workers, across Europe. All workers should be able to take sick leave without fear of losing their jobs or income.

- any (migrant) worker, who loses income during quarantine, is suspended or made redundant should receive financial support and be entitled to free public healthcare and decent housing.
- ensure income support measures for all those that have no access to any social protection.
- all workers, including migrant workers, have a right to safe and healthy working conditions, those who continue to work with the public must be supplied with free facial masks, alongside other preventive health measures and testing.
- increase public investment to support universal public health services. Healthcare charges should be scrapped. Put in places ‘firewalls’ that safeguard undocumented migrants from the possible transfer of their personal data from health services to immigration authorities. Public authorities must guarantee access to healthcare and social protection for all.
- continue to carry out targeted inspections of working conditions in sectors at high risk of labour exploitation and unsafe working conditions in the context of the pandemic, ensuring that all workers are supported in accessing information and protective measures, support and redress and face no risk of immigration enforcement.

- provide access to safe and adequate accommodation for homeless people, regardless of residence status.
- introduce regularisation measures to reduce vulnerability, labour exploitation and social exclusion of irregular migrant workers ensuring their full equal treatment, decent working conditions and access to public healthcare.
- extend or issue temporary permits or visas to prevent further irregularity.

(1) *Please note that we are focusing only on labour related issues that all migrant workers are facing in the context of the COVID crisis. We acknowledge the appalling situation in which asylum-seekers and refugees are living in refugee camps and hotspots, and of those being held in immigration detention centres.*

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ETUC affiliates relevant links on COVID-19 and migrants

Belgium

Coronavirus: permettre à tous de se confiner est la seule manière d'en sortir

France

Coronavirus : travailleurs et travailleuses migrants en première ligne

Migrants et demandeurs d'asile, quelles solutions pendant la crise sanitaire en France ?

Germany

Corona: important information for workers

Information about corona and labour law

Italy

Coronavirus: Cgil, Cisl, Uil, tutelare anche i cittadini stranieri per la sicurezza. Chiediamo avvio confronto

https://www.cisl.it/in-evidenza/15650-coronavirus-cgil-cisl-uil-tutelare-anche-i-cittadini-stranieri- per-la-sicurezza-chiediamo-avvio-confronto.html
https://www.uil.it/immigrazione/NewsSX.asp?ID_News=12476

Spain

CCOO pide agilidad y altura de miras al Gobierno en matería de extranjería durante la crisis del COVID19

UGT demanda medidas específicas para proteger más a la población de nacionalidad extranjera y el trabajo doméstico

The Netherlands

Labour migrants and the coronavirus - COVID-19
https://www.fnv.nl/polski/home/corona/q-a-eu- labour-migrants-and-the-coronavirus-covid-1

UK

Coronavirus guidance for unions

Petition to the UK government *#SickPayForAll: Guarantee decent sick pay for every worker*

'Working in the UK' a guide to your rights and joining a union in 21 languages

Winning workplace unity' TUC Online course for trade unions to tackle the far right in workplaces and communities

Guide to building solidarity between UK, EU and other migrant workers

European Trade Union Federations

EFFAT

Workers in agriculture food production and tourism deserve better protection

EPSU

Fighting COVID-19 in prisons and detention centres in Europe

Statement by EPSU and social services employers

EFFAT/UNI-Europa Joint Statement on the COVID-19 Pandemic in Personal and Household Services (PHS)

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