

European Parliament votes to protect health and safety of firefighters



(17 May 2023) On 26 April the European Parliament voted unanimously in favour of strengthening worker protection against asbestos. Despite being banned since 2005, asbestos still claims up to 90,000 lives in Europe annually, accounting for 55-85% of occupational lung cancers. This vote sends a clear message to the co-legislators about the ambition of the European Parliament, by not only lowering the occupational exposure limit to 1000f/m³ but also by showing clearly that MEPs have listened to the voice of firefighters and their demands.

Firefighters are recognised as a group at risk for exposure to asbestos and in order to protect them, the Parliament voted to include two key measures: first, the establishment of compulsory decontamination processes, to be negotiated by sectoral social partners and second, the creation of national asbestos registries so that their exposure can be tracked, and diseases recognised. The need to map the presence of asbestos in buildings is also a joint request from unions and employers (EPSU and CEMR) as social partners of the EU sectoral social dialogue committee for local governments. EPSU will continue working to ensure the inclusion of these points into the final text and calls on the European Commission and the Council to listen to the voice of firefighters.

On 8 May, MEP Nikolaj Villumsen (Denmark, the Left Group), rapporteur for the Carcinogens, Mutagens and Reprotoxins Directive (5th batch), set a groundbreaking precedent for firefighters. In his [proposal](#), he brings to the table the decision of the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) – World Health Organization (WHO) to reclassify professional exposure as a firefighter as carcinogenic to human (Group 1). Villumsen urges the recognition of this decision and advocates for improved protection of these workers. He calls upon the European Commission to establish a definition of 'carcinogenic occupations' and include a non-exhaustive list of such occupations as an annex to this Directive. This would mean the recognition by the EU of the decision of the IARC WHO and would open the recognition of certain professions to be carcinogenic, such as firefighting or certain jobs in the waste sector.

EPSU calls on the MEPs in the EMPL Committee to support this proposal and will mobilise together with its members and the firefighters' network to make this proposal pass.

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