

ADAPTATION TO CLIMATE CHANGE

HAS THE EUROPEAN UNION FORGOTTEN ABOUT FIREFIGHTERS AND EMERGENCY SERVICES?

As part of the European Green Deal, the European Commission launched in February 2021 a new strategy on adaptation to climate change. The objective is to make the European Union a climate-resilient society, fully adapted to climate change by 2050.

The strategy aims at strengthening the adaptive capacity of the European Union, reducing the impacts of climate change. This will be done through a smarter, more systemic, faster and more international adaptation. This means improving the knowledge of climate impacts and solutions, accelerating adaptation planning and action and helping to reinforce climate resilience in the world.

WHAT'S FOR EMERGENCY SERVICES?

The critical consequences of climate change such as floods, droughts, wildfires and extreme heat have a significant impact on emergency services. Indeed, public service workers such as firefighters, health professional and civil protection staff, who are always on the front line whenever emergencies rise, will be faced with more and more dangerous situations. Also, extreme weather conditions and rising temperatures will increase these workers' stress and workload.

However, in the new Adaptation strategy, there is no sign of any proposals for protecting emergency services from the devastating climate change's effects they will face.

From 2019 to 2021, the ETUC run a project on the adaptation to climate change and the world of work. The outcome of the project is a [Guide for Trade Unionists on Adaptation to Climate Change and the world of work](#) that identifies public utilities and emergency and other public services as two of the sectors in the EU to be most impacted by climate change.

Without investments in and funding of public services, the report concludes that job losses will be up to 90 000 in emergency and other public services by 2050. Currently these last sectors account for 16% of EU employment. Furthermore, as underlined by a recent [EPSU study](#), natural disasters and extreme-weather events will put immense pressure on central and local government, social services, education, public transport, and disaster management units.

The most severe impacts for the public sector are expected for emergency and rescue services as well as for the health care sector, which will be at the forefront of the fight against negative consequences of climate change. The report outlines a number of ways these sectors will be negatively affected, and addresses challenges which unions in these sectors are facing across the EU, such as the lack of public funding and staff shortages.

FIREFIGHTERS AND CLIMATE CHANGE

The ETUC guide mentioned above outlines that the danger of forest fires driven by weather is expected to increase, which will of course have detrimental effects on fire and rescue services, leading to greater workload, a deterioration of the firefighter's working-conditions and increased risks for their safety.

The main concerns include firefighters suffering heat stress, injuries due to uneven terrain, smoke inhalation and flying firebrands. Furthermore, large wildfires or heath fires can temporarily drain the fire cover of a large area, resulting in increased response times for primary fires and rescues.

Fire crews will be tired from the increase of incidents, sickness and injury levels may rise due to fatigue and equipment will be under more strain due to more frequent usage.

Climate change is going to lead to variations in precipitation levels, increasing the risk of droughts and water-scarcity, which can affect brigades' training and demonstrative capabilities. Water companies can reduce the pressure in their mains supplies to minimize leakage, so firefighters may have to relay water across longer distances from alternative water sources.

The potential problems linked with the changing weather conditions require the adoption of appropriate responses, such as additional recruitments and investment into equipment (specialist firefighting appliances, water bowsers, portable dams, planes and helicopters assisting with the rapid extinguishing of wild fires). Prevention measures, such as updated fire risk plans and regular and appropriate training, will also have to be enforced. Climate change will also lead to an increase in the number of floods, droughts, storms and heat waves, which, in turn, will impact firefighters working conditions, health and safety. Under a high warming scenario, flood risk could more than triple by the end of the century.

Emergency and rescue services play three main roles during flooding: (1) emergency response and rescue, (2) damage mitigation and (3) making flooded areas safe before residents are permitted to return home.

Extreme weather events pose a variety of health and safety hazards to rescue workers, such as injuries from slips and falls, being struck by airborne objects, inadequate sleep and nutrition due to long and uninterrupted work shifts, physical exhaustion, mental stress, and vehicular crashes.

Other potential health and safety hazards associated with flooding are: the exposure to toxic substances or contaminated flood waters (with chemical waste, oil, diesel, pesticides, fertilizers, etc.), asbestos and other hazardous dusts, mold, biological agents, flood debris, electrical hazards, drownings and blood-borne pathogen infections.

Climatic events may also be a source of important stress for workers, with possible negative implications at work (burn-out, increased workplace violence, etc.) and in their private life (depression, post-traumatic stress disorders linked to activities during cleanup operations).

EPSU's REACTION TO THE EU COMMISSION PROPOSAL

In this context, the European Public Service Union has welcomed the Commission's aim to strengthen and to revise the 2013 EU Adaptation Strategy. However, the foreseen outcomes of the strategy do not sufficiently address the impacts that climate change will have on the world of work and, notably, on public services and public service workers like those in emergency services.

EPSU's key recommendations for firefighters and emergency services workers:

- **Strengthening health and safety measures** of public service workers such as firefighters, health professional and civil protection staff.
- **Revising the strategy to include preventive measures** such as flexible working hours, recruitment of more staff, ensuring safe work environments, adequate protective equipment and the necessary skills to reduce and to prevent climate risks.

Other EPSU (and ETUC)'s recommendations to the EU Commission's proposal:

- **Include a stronger social dimension with a people-centred approach.** For the social dimension, the Commission introduces the concept of just resilience. However, we regret the fact that the Just Resilience's concept is not clearly defined. The Commission should include more concrete proposals for the social dimension in order to protect most vulnerable workers and communities.
- **Introduce concrete policy measures that maintain jobs and protect workers' health and safety.** There should be a clear link with the EU Strategy on Health and Safety at Work and, in parallel, the Adaptation strategy should also promote active labour market policies as well as reskilling and trainings programmes
- **Provide for a strong and inclusive governance approach where workers and trade unions are involved.** We proposed a more concrete involvement of trade unions in the design and implementation of the National adaptation plans and strategies and it encourages the use of collective bargaining and social dialogue to address problems caused by climate change effects.
- **Guarantee sufficient investments in public services and infrastructures as well as functioning and inclusive social protection systems.** Emergency workers and social protection mechanisms will be key to deal with future crises and increase the resilience of our societies. They should be properly financed and the Commission should issue clear guidance and recommendations to Member States to strengthen them.
- **The strategy should include the Right to Energy and the Right to Water.** The references to these rights in the Commission strategy are weak. They fail to include concrete provisions to implement them. More frequent extreme weather events (both in winter and summer time) will make universal and affordable access to water and energy more challenging for low-income households. They must be protected.
- **The strategy should take a gender responsive approach, increasing female representation in the development and implementation process of the strategy.** Climate change will have different effects on men and women and if a gender perspective is not included in adaptation policies and inequalities will increase.

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