EPSU on strategies to gradually leave lockdown and the new 1.5-2 metre society: not without the workers and trade unions

As some countries are getting a grip on the pandemic and the spread of COVID19, discussions have started on leaving the lockdown and relaxing the measures. This means workers going back to work and people coming more in contact with each other as they increase their use of products and services. The European Commission has published its proposals for the exit-strategy but these do not recognize that workers have concerns about their health and safety and that employers need to take all precautionary measures needed to prevent workers from being infected. This is also the consequence of the lack of consultation by the Commission of the proposals with social partners, whether at sector or confederal level.

Based on policies of unions which have already concluded agreements, EPSU proposes that the gradual relaxing of the measures require the following conditions:

- **Public health advice should inform the decisions and be taken into account**. Too early relaxation of measures can lead to new outbreaks, increase the burdens and stress faced by the women and men working in our health and care services and throw us back into confinement with longer-term negative effects on jobs, income and people's lives;
- **Consultation of the social partners is crucial to ensure that the measures to return to work are in the interest of workers**. Such consultation should take place at national, sectoral and workplace level. EPSU supports the ETUC's demand that the Commission should have a proper consultation on the EU-level easing of confinement measures with the European employers and trade unions. Governments should be careful not to support companies that cannot prove they have consulted with the trade unions.
- **Increased testing should be part of the relaxing of confinement measures.** This will provide the information necessary to track infected persons, to monitor the health of the population and to quarantine infected persons. This implies enough staff and enough resources for the health system are available to do the tracking and monitoring.
- **A return to work implies that personal protective equipment (PPE) must be available at the workplace and that social distancing is possible and respected. Employers have to make the relevant PPE available.** With policies being gradually phased in, more and more people will come in contact with each other. Steps to relax measures must take account of the availability of PPE so that workers in health, residential homes and elderly care, in public services like prisons, police, firefighters, utilities, public transport and education and workers in services like food and retail that ensure we can eat and drink will not lack PPE. Masks should be provided to people using public transport..
- **Workplace preparedness plans need to be discussed and agreed between the employer and workplace representatives**. The plans should:
  - respect the overall health and safety protocols and guidelines developed by the trade unions and employers for the sector;
  - respect the requirements of social distancing (namely 1.5-2m);
  - make PPE available;
  - follow the WHO prescribed sanitary rules (washing of hands, use of gels, on sneezing and staying at home when not feeling well)

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- o allow working from home where possible, and if requested when, for example, workers don't feel safe using public transport. In many situations working at home remains the norm;
- o make sure the plans do not impact negatively on women or ethnic minority workers which have been in the forefront dealing with the pandemic
- o protect workers who are running a higher risk when infected for example because of existing conditions;
- o include guidelines on what to do in case of infection and the need to quarantine, with measures to protect workers' pay;
- o consider risks arising in transport to and from the workplace, including when travel is part of the job, such as home visits;
- o address risks arising from contact with service users, such as patients and passengers;
- o carry out regular cleaning of workplaces and especially contact points;
- o prevent workers from being in close contact with each other in confined spaces such as changing rooms, kitchens, canteens and access halls. This might require staggered working times or rotation schemes to reduce the number of workers together at any one time;
- o spell out what to do with waste, providing special bins, for example; and
- o take account of the detailed back-to-work advice from the European Occupational Safety and Health Agency which includes information on specific occupations and sectors as well as guidance from the World Health Organisation.
- **Unions will support workers that refuse to work when, despite repeated calls, the employer fails to provide a safe working environment.**
- **Labour and health and safety inspectorates need to play their role in monitoring, follow up and sanctioning of employers not respecting the rules**. They should have the resources to do this.
- **Covid-19 should be classified as an occupational disease for those workers for whom contact with other people such as children, the elderly, patients, passengers or prisoners is part of their daily work.**
- **Data protection and privacy provisions should be respected** and ensure that workers can only be tracked on a voluntary basis to identify whether they have been in contact with a person carrying the virus.

Telework and public services
Many workers are working from home, including in public administrations, social security institutions and other public services. Together with many others they have kept our society functioning. This will continue during the gradual relaxing of the confinement measures. For many organisations and companies this is a new way of working.
- We expect employers to discuss and agree with the trade unions how this will be organised. While there is scope for innovation, telework can also lead to more stress and pressure especially in combination with the anxieties and social isolation arising from confinement.
- Training should remain available and accessible.
- As for all workers, working time needs to be respected and workers have the right to be disconnected and not expected to be permanently on standby.
- While in normal circumstances, telework can help reconcile family and professional life, in the period of confinement care needs to be taken to address the extra pressures that may arise where family members are constantly around.
- Data security and privacy should be guaranteed.

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- Trade union rights, information and consultation rights and representation should be guaranteed. The arrangements should be part of a collective agreement negotiated between the unions and the employers.

Creating European capacity to produce PPE

As the need for PPE will remain high during the many months to come EPSU has asked the European Commission and Member States to demand that industries convert to producing PPE and create a European capacity and stockpile. The same is true for producing testing kits. It is a strategic choice for the EU to create a European company to do this. The EU and other European countries should consider creating a European supply chain, so allowing the possibility to control prices and prevent malpractice.

Use of funding

Member States and the European Union are making financial resources available to support companies getting through the crisis and to stimulate the economy in the months to come. The use of such funds should go to companies that have collective agreements, are not laying workers off, are paying their taxes and can prove, through public country-by-country reporting, that they are not evading taxes.

Guidance from the European Occupational Safety and Health Agency (OSHA): *COVID-19: back to the workplace – adapting workplaces and protecting workers*

Detailed advice from OSHA is available, including on specific occupations and sectors (see section 8 of the guidance). Workers who come into physical contact with many people are at the greatest risk of contracting COVID-19. These include but are not limited to workers in the healthcare, residential and home care, essential workers at increased risk include, for example, those involved in food supply and retail, waste collection, utilities, police and security, and public transport. More detailed information is available on the website of EU-OSHA or of your national OSH agency.

Useful guidance is also available from the World Health Organisation. http://www.euro.who.int/en/countries/ukraine/news/news/2020/4/whoeurope-publishes-considerations-for-gradual-easing-of-covid-19-measures

And see the joint position of the ILO and the WHO on protecting workers now the lock downs ease https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_742898/lang--en/index.htm