

Making work fit for workers after Covid-19

The welfare state sought to protect workers from labour-market risks. After Covid-19, reduced working time and greater autonomy must be on the agenda.

By Esther Lynch

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Covid-19 has radically transformed workplaces, turning offices into empty shells and homes into offices, and imposing demanding hygiene and distancing requirements in sectors ranging from culture and catering to manufacturing and distribution.

What can society learn from the experience of recent months, and use to adapt work and workplaces to the real needs of modern workers? What measures should trade unions press for, so that the return to more ‘normal’ arrangements also brings a more human dimension and makes work more flexible, smarter, and more appropriate to the lives of European citizens?

All the evidence points to the key importance of involving workers and their trade unions in the design and implementation of measures that will shape the post-Covid-19 world of work. Social dialogue and collective bargaining at all levels are key to ensuring a safe return to work, and [social dialogue](#) has proved it can prevent or reverse the negative effects of virus-driven restructuring.

Working-time reduction

Some 45 million people—around a quarter of the EU workforce—are on short-time work or similar schemes, an idea promoted by trade unions and negotiated by the social partners. [Short-time work arrangements](#) should always be agreed with unions and should not only maintain jobs but also protect workers’ incomes. As well as redesigning work organisation, moving to post-pandemic workplaces must mean new skills training and could include agreed working-time reduction. The four-day working week may seem a

radical concept now but trade unions are beginning to put it [firmly on the table](#) for the medium term.

Germany’s largest trade union, [IG Metall](#), has proposed negotiating a four-day week to secure jobs against economic fallout from the coronavirus crisis and structural shifts in the automobile industry. In Ireland, research by the trade union [FORSA](#) has shown that 77 per cent of workers support a four-day week—defined as same job, same salary, same productivity but over four days rather than five.

Under cover of the pandemic, it was to be expected that some employers would abuse the vulnerability of workers, for example firing and then rehiring on worse pay and conditions. This unacceptable practice must be ended, and in particular governments should not offer financial support to companies that implement this or similar policies.

[In Austria](#), under a scheme agreed by the social partners, no employees can be laid off for business reasons during short-time work. In addition, any employee who has participated in short-time work cannot be let go for a further month after it ends. If a termination is necessary for personal reasons, the employer has to hire a new worker.

Flexibility, not insecurity

Some initiatives already under way could help to shape the post-coronavirus workplace. Trade unions involved in Germany’s [Arbeit 2020](#) project have challenged standardised, monotonous work patterns, because ‘future

work will require highly qualified workers able to operate independently’.

Greater flexibility or autonomy must not mean greater insecurity. [Research](#) confirms that social protection and income security increase, rather than reducing, platform workers’ autonomy, and [their interests](#) must also be included in post-virus recovery plans. In Belgium, the [SMart](#) cooperative, set up to support freelance workers, offers a model of [democratic management](#) in which all members take part in decision-making, increasing their collective capability.

The pandemic has coincided with a period of rapid change in work organisation, moving away from ‘factory-style’ patterns towards more flexible options. All the more reason to ensure these innovations assist workers and do not make their lives more arduous or difficult.

Working from home

Since the beginning of the year, millions of people across Europe have been working from home. Trade unions supported this move to protect workers from contact with the virus. But teleworking can blur the line between professional and personal, especially for those who are new to it. Employers must not now take advantage of future changes in work organisation to demand longer hours or constant availability.

By 2015, around one-fifth of workers were already doing some form of telework or ICT-based mobile work (TICTM), but a [European Working Conditions Survey](#) found that those working regularly from home were twice as likely to work 48 hours or more a week than those working at their employer’s premises—and six times more likely to work in their free time. According to [European Parliament](#) research, long-range managerial monitoring and demand for constant availability can create psychosocial health risks, stress and isolation.

TICTM can be good for work-life balance, enabling people to adapt their working time to

their private and family needs. However, even workers with high levels of autonomy can suffer greater work pressure—a problem known as the autonomy paradox. A 2020 European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) [study](#) found that few countries had implemented regulations to protect TICTM workers’ well-being.

Red lines

Since 2002, social partners at EU level have had a blueprint for negotiating good practices.

The ETUC and European employers’ Social Partner [Framework Agreement](#) on telework establishes important principles and red lines which should be respected, including equal pay and employment conditions and normal working hours. Teleworkers are entitled to reimbursement of additional expenses such as equipment, Wi-Fi and the increased cost of home utilities. Employers must provide skills training and technical support and ensure workers do not become isolated, while workers must have their right to disconnect [fully respected](#). It may be time for the social partners at EU level to discuss stronger enforcement of this agreement.

Recent experience has conclusively debunked the old myth that teleworking is tantamount to taking time off. Organisations and systems have continued to function and workers have adapted to new applications for online contacts. Now these innovative ways of working must continue to be available for workers as part of the collective agreement.

A [sample of interviews](#) in Ireland found that 87 per cent of staff would like to continue to work all or some of the week from home after the pandemic. The International Labour Organization’s guide to teleworking during the pandemic and beyond [recommends](#) focusing on results and not on the number of hours worked. Keeping the workload manageable and setting realistic expectations enables

workers to organise their own tasks and to balance work obligations and personal lives.

During lockdown, it was primarily women who shouldered the burden of juggling homeworking with care for children off school or dependants showing signs of infection. The pandemic is not gender-neutral and the socio-economic consequences of the virus have hit women worst—most notably [low-paid frontline workers](#). In future, women’s work must enjoy the pay and status it deserves, coupled with real opportunities for work-life balance.

Workplace autonomy

What should a return to ‘normal’ work look like? Since it has been demonstrated that workers can be trusted to work at home, they should also have more autonomy within the workplace. Another Eurofound [study](#) shows that enabling employees to take initiatives and contribute to organisational decision-making increases motivation and encourages skill development. This is a key element of the quality jobs the ETUC has long been demanding.

Workplaces with high employee involvement perform better. The study found 29 per cent of employees in the EU, Norway and the UK enjoyed a high level of employee involvement. Nearly half (47 per cent) felt highly engaged in their work—almost double the proportion in low-involvement organisations (24 per cent). Highly engaged employees are more positive

about their jobs, less often absent and report higher levels of wellbeing. High involvement also promotes informal skill development and innovative thinking and means high- and lower-skilled employees develop their abilities at more equal speeds.

Finally, it is time to end the use of intrusive worker [surveillance tools](#), such as wristbands, thermal and security cameras and recorded footage. In the United States, a new [survey](#) suggests that Amazon uses such methods specifically to prevent union organisation. Data protection and privacy provisions should also be respected when it comes to tracking workers to see if they have been in contact with the virus.

The coronavirus pandemic has transformed the way people live and work in Europe and around the world, affecting health, social relationships and economic stability. The full impact on the labour market is only now becoming apparent but it is inevitable that the way work is organised will change permanently. The future must be built on equality, solidarity and collective decision-making.

Esther Lynch was elected as a deputy general secretary of the ETUC at its Vienna Congress in 2019, having previously been a confederal secretary. She has extensive experience of the trade union movement both in Ireland and at European and international level. Before joining the ETUC, she was the legislation and social affairs officer of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU).