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WORK SAFETY IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: INTERNATIONAL WORKERS' DAY AND THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMY



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International Workers' Day, celebrated annually on 1 May, highlights the importance of workers' rights, including safety and well-being at work.

In the European Union, the role of the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) has emerged as a major force in promoting safety at work and fostering inclusive economic growth.

The EU has a strong legislative framework to ensure **safe and healthy working conditions for its citizens**. The framework directive 89/391/EEC serves as the cornerstone, promoting improvements in **occupational safety and health (OSH)** across the EU. The social and solidarity economy comprises enterprises and organisations that prioritise social objectives and solidarity over profit maximisation. It includes cooperatives, mutual societies, non-profit organisations and social enterprises, which play a key role in promoting sustainable development and social inclusion.

SSE companies often operate with a **community-centred approach**, prioritising the well-being of employees and stakeholders. This emphasis on collective well-being fosters a culture of mutual support and safety awareness. SSE promotes inclusive employment practices and offers opportunities to marginalised groups, including people with disabilities, refugees and the long-term unemployed.

By integrating diverse talents and perspectives, SSE entities enrich workplace safety cultures through collaboration and shared responsibility.

Many SSE organisations are involved in capacity building and training initiatives, raising awareness of OSH practices and equipping workers with the skills and knowledge they need to reduce workplace risks.

International Workers' Day serves as a catalyst to celebrate the contributions of workers around the world and to advocate for their rights and safety. SSE's ethos aligns seamlessly with the principles of International Workers' Day, emphasising solidarity, equality and collective well-being.

While the SSE has made significant progress in promoting occupational safety and social inclusion, challenges remain. In Europe, women, particularly those employed in part-time or temporary jobs in SSE, are disproportionately affected by work-related health problems, including musculoskeletal disorders and stress-related illnesses. A study by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) found that **only 60% of SSE organisations have a formal safety policy**, compared to 75% of traditional companies.



In Belgium,

Many social economy enterprises lack the specialised expertise and resources needed to develop and implement **effective occupational safety policies**. Limited access to training programmes and consultancy services can leave workers and managers ill-equipped to identify and address safety risks effectively. **The health of workers has deteriorated significantly**. The number of workers reporting that work has a (negative) impact on their health has increased. Out of 5 indicators of psychological wellbeing, 4 will decrease between 2015 and 2021.

The mental well-being of Belgian workers is measured in the EWC(t)| EWC(t)S 2021 using the WHO (mental) well-being index self-assessment questionnaire (WHO-5) (Topp et al., 2015). Approximately 7% of respondents reported feeling 'not at all' or 'sometimes' mentally well in the last two weeks.

Improving safety at work by building workers' capacity through the adoption of effective internal policies should be a priority. Projects like PROTECT involve a wide range of stakeholders across Europe to contribute to a safer and fairer workplace, free from workplace bullying and harassment.

PROTECT project

PROTECT is an innovative project that aims to work with both workers and employers to generate discussion, new research and methods to promote a **more inclusive, attractive and ultimately equal labour market for women across Europe**. It provides a code of conduct for workers, an online reporting tool and a training course for both workers and employers.

International Workers' Day is a powerful reminder of the enduring importance of safety at work and the collective efforts needed to protect and empower workers around the world. In the EU, the transformative impact of the social and solidarity economy underlines the potential of collaborative, community-driven approaches to promote a culture of safety, inclusion and solidarity at work.

In conclusion, the **convergence of International Workers' Day and the SSE Principles** serves as a compelling **call to action**, urging stakeholders across sectors to unite in their commitment to creating workplaces where every individual is valued, protected and empowered. Through collaboration, innovation and advocacy, we can build a future where work serves as a beacon of dignity, justice and shared prosperity for all.

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