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Improve job quality and health.

Healthy Work **Strategies**

How to Prevent Psychosocial Risks in Healthcare and Long-term Care Sectors in the EU (2022) - Trade Union Action

This case study briefly summarizes **trade union actions to prevent work-related psychosocial risks** in the European Union, solely from research reported in section 4 of “Work-related psychosocial risks in the healthcare and long-term care sectors.”¹

As stated on the report summary page²:

Work-related psychosocial risks (PSR) are a major contributor to the burden of disease in Europe. The health impacts of PSR are evident in the healthcare and long-term care sectors and were brought to everyone’s attention by the Covid-19 pandemic. This introductory guide presents the key aspects of PSR in the healthcare and long-term care sectors...

The contents are based on the results of an evidence review of scientific literature and analysis of interviews with trade union representatives in Germany, Spain, and Sweden, brought together in the ETUI report ‘Psychosocial risks in the healthcare and long-term care sectors: evidence review and trade union views’. This guide aims to clarify what work-related PSR are, and to inspire further trade union actions on PSR to ensure safe and healthy workplaces for healthcare and care workers.

See Appendix A (Section 4 of the report¹) for:

descriptions of actions taken by trade unions to tackle this critical occupational safety and health (OSH) issue.²

References:

1. Barbara Helfferich, Paula Franklin. (2022, Nov. 22). [Work-related psychosocial risks in the healthcare and long-term care sectors \(report PDF\)](#). In ETUI, The European Trade Union Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.etui.org/>.

2. Barbara Helfferich, Paula Franklin. (2022, Nov. 22). [Work-related psychosocial risks in the healthcare and long-term care sectors \(summary page\)](#). In ETUI, The European Trade Union Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.etui.org/>.

Appendix A

“Trade union actions to prevent psychosocial risks”

The below is an excerpt, Section 4, from “Work-related psychosocial risks in the healthcare and long-term care sectors” (report).²

**Work-related
psychosocial risks
in the healthcare
and long-term care
sectors**
**Sources, factors,
and prevention measures**

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4. Trade union actions to prevent psychosocial risks

‘PSR is the primary cause of unhappiness, demotivation and absenteeism from work. It is already and will continue to be the major battle to fight for trade unions in the 21st century; it is what is coming and we need to tackle it.’ (UGT Galicia, Spain)

The work of trade unions in the healthcare and long-term care sectors on PSR prevention is paramount to protect workers and mitigate the effects of adverse working conditions on their health. Trade unions can:

- protect the rights of workers;
- work towards sustainable structural and financial improvements in these sectors; and
- be a unique source of empowerment allowing for class action and proper OSH representation at the place of work.

While trade unions have been aware of the problem of work-related PSR for a long time, a lack of legislation has hampered the actions of trade unions to address PSR in the healthcare and long-term care sectors and beyond. Nevertheless, unions have developed a variety of strategies and actions to support workers. Actions have included, among others, lobbying, campaigns, strategic and practical support at the workplace level, and collective agreements.

4.1 Lobbying for an adequate legislative EU framework

There is a need for an EU directive on psychosocial health risks to clarify the employers’ duty to prevent and deal with these risks and to organise work in such a way that creates good conditions for the employees (ETUC 2021).

Even though legislation is a strong driving force for employers to assume their responsibility for occupational health and safety, there is very little legislation, and in only few EU Member States, that addresses psychosocial risks directly. At the EU level there is no dedicated legislation, and in the Framework Directive on Occupational Safety and Health there is only one somewhat clear reference to work organisation.

The ETUC and its affiliates are campaigning for a directive that addresses psychosocial risks in the workplace. The ETUC addresses the need to expand the scope and definition so that social and relational aspects are included, such as the safe organisation of work (e.g. limiting the number of pace determinants a worker is subject to, measuring work pressure, time pressure, control/influence, monitoring and surveillance, performance management and change etc.) as well as the social aspects (management quality, support from management and peers, harassment and violence, bullying) are properly taken into account, along with physical factors such as noise, heat and levels of vibration.

The campaign *EndStress.EU* has been jointly set up by Eurocadres and ETUC and is advocating for the said directive. The campaign invites trade unions and employers alike to join the call for a European directive, working with an internet platform, webinars, and other multi-media tools.

4.2 Examples of action from Germany, Spain and Sweden

Unions are extremely well placed to provide information and to consult with their membership so that their actions on PSR are informed by bottom-up approaches. Although employers have a legal responsibility to ensure that workplace risks are properly assessed and controlled, it is essential that workers are also involved. Workers and their representatives have the best understanding of the risks in their workplace and involving them will ensure that the measures put in place are both appropriate and effective.

Trade unions in Germany, Spain and Sweden understand that PSR represents a serious issue that impacts workers' health, and they are taking action.

In Germany trade unions have concentrated on supporting the creation of work councils in healthcare and eldercare organisations; they also have recent successes with concluding several important collective agreements in the hospital sector. It is estimated that only 10 per cent of long-term care institutions have work councils; union representatives support care workers if they wish to push for the establishment of one in their institution.

While recent research indicates that workers in the health and care sectors are more reluctant to strike than other sectors, strikes can be an effective means of bringing about positive tangible changes in these sectors.

The result of the strike action in hospitals in Berlin, Germany, October 2021

The collective agreements in the healthcare sector between Ver.di, Charité, and Vivantes stipulate how many clinical staff must be deployed on the wards and in specific departments.

If employees work multiple times in understaffed shifts or in otherwise stressful situations, they receive additional days off.

'As there are no common regulations regarding staff:patient ratios, each hospital has different rules and, if those rules are not kept, middle management needs to know that there are sanctions if they are not adequately enforced. It should also be the aim to ensure enough free time for staff and for that we need to have an instrument that forces employers to ensure, for example, enough staff, better pay and better working conditions.' (*ver.di*)

In Spain, the law obliges employers to undertake a risk assessment that includes PSR, but the majority of companies/centres engaged in providing health services and long-term care do not regularly assess the risks that each job position may entail. Those who do most often fail to include PSR. Unions can address these failures by referring to the law and ensuring monitoring and follow-up. Spanish trade unions have opted to address this via the obligatory Equality Plan; Spanish law requires companies with over 50 workers to draw up and apply an equality plan aimed at achieving equal treatment for women and men. Equality plans are subject to negotiation with workers' representatives.

'We're tackling more PSR with gender equality plans. In collective bargaining [and on] work councils, PSR is not discussed in detail, but it does find expression in the "prevention councils".' (UGT, Catalunya)

Trade unions have also developed specific ways of responding to obligatory company risk assessment reports by drafting counter reports stating that the mitigation measures fall short of what is really needed. From time to time, this has produced good results in terms of greater flexibility in arriving at work and leaving work and developing better rotation routines to reduce work-life conflict; getting more and specific training to cope with emotional demands, and even hiring another person to reduce high quantitative demands. Unions have also taken on grievance cases and conducted awareness campaigns on psychosocial risks.

In Sweden, the Trade Union Confederation (LO) started to work with 290 municipalities (before the Covid-19 pandemic) to help them address staff shortages directly linked to PSR by bringing in a team of experts to investigate those places where the highest rates of sick leave were reported. The Swedish Municipal Workers' Union (Kommunal) has created its own work environment strategy that covers issues such as the organisation of work, staffing, working time, threats/violence and victimisation/sexual harassment. They also have guidelines that take account of the specificity of a sectoral work environment and feature a toolbox for particular situations or problems at work.