



01 June 2020

TRADE UNION RESPONSES TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

A. INTRODUCTION

In the space of just a few weeks, the COVID-19 crisis has radically transformed the lives of people around the globe with major consequences for people's work and income. For the great majority, it has meant their economic situation has worsened and their financial future seems uncertain. The virus has revealed and exacerbated pre-existing inequalities and fractures in all our societies. In BWI sectors, teleworking is rarely an option and social distancing a challenge. Workers in BWI sectors are often facing difficult choices as to whether to go to work



and risk their health - or stay at home and face hunger and hardship. In the Pan Europe region, there are remarkable instances of governments working with employers and unions to find solutions that work for the many. However, in too many other countries, government support has been woefully inadequate or non-existent. The formal economy workforce has been the primary beneficiary of government job and wage protection schemes, while temporary workers, contract workers, self-employed and precarious workers have been the most affected, in some cases deprived from one day to the next of their means of survival. Unions have reacted quickly and their voice has been critical in speaking up for those who have been summarily dismissed, temporarily laid-off or forced to take unpaid leave. Unions too have provided essential support in seeking to extend income protection to the self-employed and to temporary and migrant workers in precarious work situations.

This report is part of a series of five regional reports that seek to document the extraordinary work of BWI affiliates during this time of lockdown and emergency. The intention is to present the various actions and outcomes, share good practice and inspire other unions to use these experiences in their own national contexts. The main sources of information are the BWI COVID-19 responses webpage¹ and the BWI internal database. This information has been complemented in the Pan Europe region by the knowledge and insights of the BWI Pan-Europe regional team, the European Federation of Building and Woodworkers (EF-BWW) COVID-19 webpage,² the European Construction Industry Federation COVID-19 national reviews and other information from the ILO, the IMF, the World Bank and other UN agencies.

¹<https://odoo.bwint.org/cms/covid-19-union-response-1689>

² <https://www.efbww.eu/publications-and-downloads/press-releases/covid-19-efbww-info-from-and-for-efbww-affiliates/481-a>



Know more about BWI and Affiliates' COVID-19 Responses at:
<https://odoo.bwint.org/cms/covid-19-union-response-1689>

A. Regional Pandemic Situationer: Impact on BWI Industries

1. Regional Facts and Figures



The ILO estimates that worldwide there was a 4.5% drop in working hours in the first quarter of 2020 compared to the pre-COVID-19 period and that there could be up to a 10.5 % drop in the second quarter of the year, April – June 2020. In Europe and Central Asia, these figures are estimated at 1.9% and 11.8% respectively. The ILO has also sought to calculate the impact of COVID-19 on the earnings of informal workers based on a purchasing power parity index. The figures include earnings from own-account workers, and informal wage earners. Worldwide, there has been a drop of the equivalent of \$535 median earnings per month and in Europe and Central Asia, the figure is estimated at \$866.³

In the EU-27, the construction industry represents 9% of GDP and employs 16 million workers, representing 6.4% of total employment. The wood and furniture industries together represent 1.7% of GDP and employ more than 2 million workers. The average expected loss in construction activity in the EU is estimated at between 20%-25% for both 2020 and 2021 as compared to 2019, estimated at a yearly value of a downturn of €320 billion. The construction industry estimates that almost 3 million jobs could be at risk.⁴ For example, at national level,

in the Netherlands, the construction industry research institute predicts a 15% decrease in construction and 40,000 job losses over the next two years.

2. Countries in lockdown and impact on BWI Industries

Confirmed cases of the COVID-19 pandemic reached Russia and Central Asia in early February and Southern Europe from mid-February 2020. Italy was the first country to introduce lockdown measures from February 21, initially affecting a few municipalities and then on March 9 the whole of the country. The Spanish government issued a state of emergency on March 14 and measures calling for a strict general confinement. France followed on March 17 with a general lockdown and measures to restrict all but essential activities. Other EU countries quickly followed suit with full or partial lockdowns. The Ukraine introduced strict lockdown measures from March 17 including closure of borders and restrictions on internal movement. The Czech Republic introduced a state of emergency early on 12 March and restrictions on border crossings and quarantine measures for returning citizens and residents. Denmark and Norway imposed partial lockdown measures. Other countries, including Germany, Sweden and Switzerland did not enforce a lockdown but instead opted for social distancing measures. Beginning in late April 2020, measures to lift the lockdown have started gradually, although there are fears of a second wave of infections and the impact on the economy and daily life will continue for many years to come.

While the impact on the construction, building materials, and wood and forestry industries has varied within the region, there are certain common issues. Most workers in BWI sectors cannot benefit from the option of working from home and social distancing measures are difficult to implement. Migrant workers represent a high proportion of the workforce, often living in sub-standard accommodation and on precarious contracts, as bogus self-employed or working for 'letter-box' companies. In countries with strict lockdown measures, only essential operations were allowed to continue, if they could meet strict occupational health and safety and social distancing and sanitary guidelines, while a substantial proportion of the workforce was required to work from home if possible, or stay at home with support from various income replacement schemes. Generally speaking, for the construction sector, urgent repairs to public utilities, some public works projects and large-scale infrastructure projects were classified as essential, and in the forestry and wood sector, the production of packaging and wood pallets. However, in countries where work in BWI sectors was not expressly prohibited, companies had to interpret the new laws and regulations. They faced different or contradictory regulations between regions or between national or regional level, particularly in relation to transport and use of public

³ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work Update 29 April https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_743146.pdf

⁴FIEC-EBC-Construction Products Europe Joint Declaration: 'European Recovery Fund: The construction ecosystem as priority with at least €320B dedicated budget' April 30 2020 available at: <http://www.fiec.eu/en/cust/documentrequest.aspx?DocID=48672>

space and difficulties with the cross border provision of goods and workers. Many posted and migrant workers found they were unable to travel to work or needed to return to their country of origin. Hence, because of large-scale disruption, work at many sites was suspended.

BWI survey conducted in April 2020 found that in the Pan-Europe region out of 25 responding unions for the construction and building sectors and 8 responding unions in the wood and furniture sectors, the majority were in situations of partial lockdown or were continuing to work.⁵ In construction, 15% were in lockdown, 51% were in partial lockdown and 40% were continuing to work. In the wood and furniture sector, 13% were in lockdown, 58% were in partial lockdown and 29% were continuing to work.

Lockdowns and Continuing Operations in BWI sectors in Europe and Central Asia

Total Lockdown	Partial Lockdown	Continuing Operations
*Bulgaria	*Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina (construction & forestry)
*Cyprus	Azerbaijan (construction, forestry & wood)	
	*Belgium	*Germany
*Italy	Bosnia & Herzegovina (furniture & wood)	*Hungary
*Spain	*Croatia	
Romania (forestry & wood)	*Denmark*	*Montenegro
	*France	*Norway
	*Germany	*Slovenia
	*Israel	*Sweden
	* North Macedonia	*Sweden
	Moldova (construction, forestry & wood)	
	Russia (Moscow 'non-working days' 28 March – 5 April extended to 11 th May construction, forestry and wood)	
	Serbia (construction, forestry & wood)	
	Sweden (forestry & wood)	
	*Switzerland	
	*Ukraine	

Source BWI database (* denotes information applies to construction sector only)

In Austria, all wood, stone and construction operations continued over the period although the government closed some construction sites as a preventive measure. In Belgium, it was estimated that 44% of all construction companies completely suspended their activities.⁶ In France, a construction industry survey on 26 March found that 91% of companies were in total shutdown and faced problems of supply of materials and equipment or could not meet additional personal protective equipment (PPE) requirements because of supply problems. By 30 April, the French union, FNCFB-CFDT estimated that about 70% of construction sites were still shut down; in building materials 55% were shut down; and in the wood sector, while wood pallets and companies producing wood

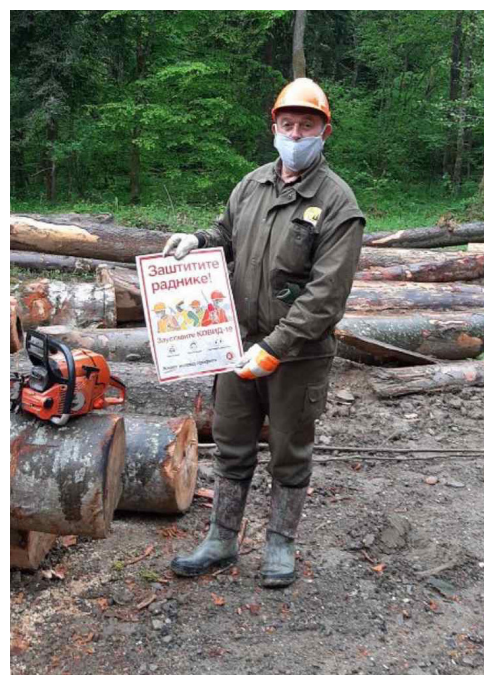
⁵BWI global survey and database on COVID-19 impact finalised on April 30 2020. Out of 7,126,500 construction workers covered by the survey in the Pan-Europe region, 1, 071,100 were in lockdown, 3,614,090 were in partial lockdown and 2,442,300 were continuing work. In the wood and furniture sector, out of 1,120,800 workers covered by the survey, 145,000 were in lockdown, 648,100 were in partial lockdown, and 326,900 were continuing work.

⁶Unless indicated, data in this section is from European Construction Industry Federation (FIEC) survey : 'COVID-19- Overview on EU and national measures' Update 4 05/04/2020 available at <http://www.fiec.eu/en/themes-72/covid-19.aspx>

⁷<https://www.rte.ie/news/business/2020/0511/1137614-two-thirds-of-construction-companies-laid-off-staff/>

for heating and packaging were 60%-80% operational, most other wood industries were working part-time. In Ireland, the Construction Industry Federation found that two-thirds of companies had laid-off workers; that nine in ten said the shutdown would impact revenue and one third saying they expect to lose in excess of 30% of income over the year.⁷ In Luxembourg, except for urgent maintenance works, construction sites were closed. In Spain, the construction sector was effectively paralysed for a period from 14 March until 8 April, after which most construction work was able to resume.

In Bulgaria, although the government did not impose a lockdown on non-essential operations, many construction companies, particularly the smaller companies, had to cease operations because of lack of raw materials. In Poland, while the construction industry did not suffer an immediate impact it anticipates a longer term decline in new contracts and are delaying or cancelling new investments, according to a survey conducted by PMR, a business consultancy firm. In Russia, the government announced an initial week of 'non-working' days which was extended to mid-May. While construction, wood and forestry continued to operate in this period, some companies closed because of lack of demand and forced workers to take unpaid leave.



3. Pathways and agreements on COVID-19 policies

From the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, unions were quick to respond, arguing that workers should not be the victims of the crisis. They called for job retention and wage subsidy schemes so as not to penalise workers in cases where companies in the BWI sectors were obliged to stop their activities. Social partners, at EU level, through the European Works Councils, and at national, regional and enterprise level, sought to agree appropriate OHS and hygiene protocols, and specific working arrangements, in order to maintain operations to the extent possible, while protecting workers' health and complying with enhanced sanitary emergency requirements. With a view to the post-crisis situation, unions also called for guarantees that there would be no deterioration in working conditions once operations resumed, job guarantee schemes, particularly for young workers, and that any future stimulus or public procurement plans would support the transition towards a low-carbon European green recovery.

According to the BWI survey, in the Pan-Europe region, in the construction sector, in 47% of cases, governments introduced schemes unilaterally or with some level of consultation with social partners, in 30% of cases, there were bipartite agreements and in 23% of cases, there were tripartite agreements. In the wood and furniture sectors, approximately one-third of responding unions indicated that there had been bipartite or tripartite agreements, although the number of responses was quite limited.

Pathways and Engagements for Covid-19 Policies

Construction

Government Policies (social partner consultations in some cases)	Bipartite or Tripartite Agreements
Azerbaijan	Belgium
Albania	Denmark
Bulgaria	Germany
Bosnia & Herzegovina	Italy
Croatia	Norway
Cyprus	Slovenia
Hungary	Spain
Moldova	Sweden

Montenegro	Turkey
North Macedonia	Ukraine
Russia	
Serbia	

Wood and Furniture Sector

Unilateral Government Policies	Bipartite or Tripartite Agreements
Azerbaijan	Sweden
Bosnia & Herzegovina	Turkey
Moldova	
Russia	
Serbia	

Source BWI database

B. BWI AFFILIATES IN ACTION

1. Employment and wage protection

In the face of the lockdowns and disruptions, unions in BWI sectors called for employment and wage protection, that workers should not be forced to sign terminations, or amended employment contracts, or forced to take unpaid leave. They argued that the unions should be an integral part of the crisis management.

The European Commission established the SURE fund to mitigate unemployment risks and to channel up to €100 billion to national systems facing the greatest pressure. On 29 April, the EU agreed a fund of € 3.3 billion for the Western Balkans, to tackle COVID-19 and the post-pandemic recovery. This includes immediate support for the health sector and for social and economic recovery, as well as a €750 million package of macro-financial assistance and €1.7 million from the European Investment Bank. In April, the IMF approved emergency funding under its Rapid Credit Facility and other funds for Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo, Moldova and North Macedonia to the value of USD 1 billion, as well as emergency funding to Georgia, Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan.⁸ In many European countries, governments in consultation with the social partners passed laws or other measures with the aim of protecting workers from redundancies. Procedures for temporary and partial unemployment measures were made more flexible and governments agreed to a variety of compensation packages for workers and companies on condition that workers were not dismissed.

In the EU countries, there are a number of good practices where tripartite and bipartite agreements ensured that workers were provided with employment and wage protections. In the Nordic countries, in Denmark, a tripartite agreement provided for 75% reimbursement of wage costs capped at DKK 23,000 per month for three months for workers on monthly wages and for workers on hourly wages, 90% of wages, capped at DKK 26,000 per month, on condition that companies did not dismiss employees for financial reasons over the period. According to BWI affiliates, this scheme has successfully averted massive redundancies. In Finland, while the construction industry has continued to operate, workers' rights to access unemployment benefits have been extended and made more flexible. In Norway, following tripartite consultations, emergency measures were adopted in Parliament to extend unemployment benefits for laid-off workers, who will receive full pay for 20 days capped at NOK 600 000 and then unemployment benefits at approximately 60% of the wage. In Sweden, the government introduced a compensation package valid until the end of 2020 so that workers placed on temporary unemployment or partial unemployment could access a state subsidy. The worker receives 90% of their average salary with 75% paid for by the government and 15% by the employer. GS-Facket, the Swedish Union of Forestry, Wood and Graphical Workers signed an agreement with its industry counterpart on 18 March on reduced working hours to avoid redundancies.

⁸<https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/COVID-Lending-Tracker#EUR>

In the Baltic countries, in Estonia, workers were entitled to 70% of average earnings over the last 12 months, capped at €1000 per month. In Latvia, workers were entitled to 75% of the average gross monthly salary for the previous 6 months, capped at €700 per month. In Lithuania, the government revised the unemployment benefit so that workers were guaranteed 60% of their wages capped at the equivalent of two minimum wages and the self-employed received €257 per month in income compensation because of the COVID-19 quarantine restrictions.

In Western and Southern Europe, in Austria, employers were required to conclude a special 'corona' social partner agreement on reduced working hours for the workforce, including apprentices, in order to benefit from a compensation package. The government agreed to cover 90% of wages so workers stayed employed. Implemented by the Austrian Labour Service, companies could register workers for short-time work over a period of up to 3 months and reduced working hours could vary from 10% - 90% of the working hours stipulated in the collective contract. In Belgium, the federal government increased the standard unemployment allowances so that workers were eligible to receive 70% of their daily wage, capped at €2754.76 per month, when normally it is 65%. In construction, workers also benefited from additional payments from the construction insurance fund and a daily supplement from the National Office of Employment. There was a similar situation for workers in the concrete industry. The self-employed and temporary workers impacted by the COVID-19 crisis were also eligible for temporary unemployment benefits or a lump sum compensation of €1,582. In woodworking and furniture, workers were also able to access temporary unemployment benefits. In the cement industry, workers were guaranteed 100% of their salaries in the first month and 80% in the following months. In France, special unemployment benefits were introduced so that companies would be compensated for 70% of gross wages and 100% for workers on minimum wages. An emergency solidarity payment was made available to the self-employed and small enterprises. In Germany, the Federal government agreed to provide compensation for workers placed on reduced working hours. However, IGBAU, on 24 March, criticised the government scheme as grossly unjust because employers' social security contributions were being fully reimbursed while workers



on reduced hours were only compensated at the rate of 60% or 67% of their lost wages. IGBAU also warned against some unscrupulous employers who might force workers to sign termination or amended employment contracts during the crisis. In Italy, from 23 February, all dismissal notices were suspended for 60 days and the government agreed to compensate workers through the unemployment fund and artisans and the self-employed were entitled to a one off €600 compensation. In Luxembourg, a simplified procedure for requesting short-time working was agreed and companies affected by the crisis could request 80% wage subsidy to be paid through the unemployment fund, capped at 250% of the minimum wage. In the Netherlands, the government support package included a 3-month temporary compensation for wage costs to avoid redundancies, and supplements to the income of self-employed. In Spain, the Federal government reached an agreement with the unions aimed at preventing dismissals, including those on temporary employment contracts, during the COVID-19 crisis.

The government agreed to provide 70% of the wages of workers as unemployment benefit, if a company requested authorisation for workers to be temporarily unemployed or put on reduced working hours. In the United Kingdom, the government introduced a job retention scheme whereby workers who are temporarily laid-off because of the COVID-19 emergency are paid 80% of the wages, capped at LGB2500 per month. Unions also successfully advocated for additional measures to protect the self-employed. UNITE argued for an income guarantee scheme for the over 1 million construction workers who are self-employed or paid through payroll and umbrella companies, stating they should not be forced to choose between their health or hardship and hunger.

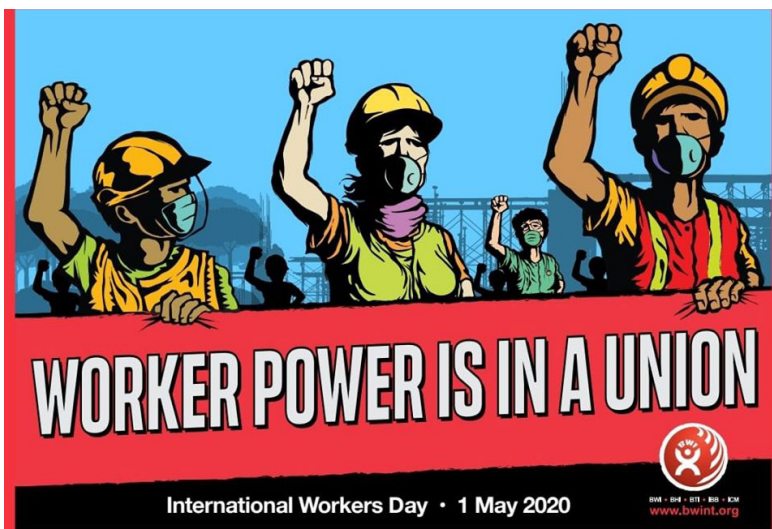
In some countries of Central and Eastern Europe and South East Europe while some protection has been offered by the government, it has not prevented many job losses particularly for temporary workers and the wage compensation was considered seriously insufficient. Generally, governments applied the provisions of

the regular labour laws and company law provisions, and workers on short-term contracts did not have their contracts renewed and were left without access to unemployment benefits. Special protection measures, where they did exist, generally only covered a short period of two or three months. Furthermore, in Croatia, Poland and Hungary, the BWI unions expressed concerns that governments are using the COVID-19 emergency as a justification to weaken labour laws and undermine collective bargaining at national or sectoral level.

In Bulgaria, after considerable pressure from the unions, the government adopted some temporary measures so that workers could take paid leave. Under the Emergency Measures and Actions Act, the Unemployment Fund will pay 60% of the wages of workers who risk being laid off for up to 3 months, provided the employer covers the other 40%. In Croatia, from 1 March for a three-month period, sectors affected by the COVID-19 crisis were entitled to an employee subsidy of HRK 4,000 (USD 570) in order to protect jobs but on condition that no new workers could be hired during the period. Additionally, the government will cover the health and pension benefit costs. However, according to NCS, some employers are demanding workers accept reduced wages and benefits. In the Czech Republic, the government set up the 'anti-virus' employment protection programme, designed to provide wage subsidies ranging from 60% -100% of average earnings for companies depending on the reasons they need to lay off workers temporarily because of the COVID-19 crisis. In Poland, the government measures allow companies to reduce working hours and wages but the unemployment benefits have not been increased and they are currently between €100 and €299 per month. Workers can be requested to take up to half their annual leave during the state of emergency. Budowlani and other unions argue that the wages subsidy scheme means that it is the poorest who shoulder the costs of the crisis. In Romania, FGS reports that 19,250 construction workers were placed on technical unemployment and 45,000 self-employed were also impacted. The government introduced a scheme whereby workers were paid 75% of the monthly net salary for a 2-month period 15 March to 15 May and there were measures to support the self-employed. FGS Familia proposed changes to the paritarian insurance fund, the Builders' Social Fund, which is normally used to pay workers during bad weather, so that it could be used during the emergency period. The fund provides better benefits, including payment of social security contributions and is taxed less as building is considered a priority industry. In Slovenia, the government agreed to co-finance 20% of the net compensation of workers who were temporarily unemployed.

In the Western Balkans, most governments provided support for minimum wages up to 65% of the normal salary, and in some cases, employers in construction contributed with an additional small percentage. However, these provisions generally meant the wage subsidy was in reality very low and often below the level of regular unemployment benefits. In North Macedonia, a tripartite agreement was concluded by the Economic and Social Council in March 2020, whereby the government agreed to provide the equivalent of a minimum wage of USD 260 to each employee for two months on condition that the workforce would not be reduced; and there would also be assistance for the self-employed. However, the government decided to unilaterally suspend some sections of the CBAs which the unions were able to successfully oppose. In the forestry industry, SIDEMK reported that production dropped by 80% and workers were at risk of losing 2 months' wages. The union took the initiative to demand support from the government and held meetings with the Prime Minister and the Ministry. In the end, the government agreed to provide support to the forestry companies so they could pay the two months' wages. In Serbia, although so far jobs and wages have been protected in the forestry and wood sector, the SSPD union expects there will be considerable job losses in the future.

In Turkey, the construction and forestry sectors continued to operate during the period. The unions called for a moratorium on redundancies and easier access to unemployment benefits. YOL-IS, the Turkish Union of Road, Construction and Building Workers was able to negotiate full wage protection for public road workers while workers most at risk because of COVID-19 were placed on paid leave. In the private sector, a 3-month



moratorium on dismissals was agreed for all employers and workers. However, companies could place workers on unpaid leave with a daily stipend of 39 liras (or US\$ 5.80) which is only half the minimum wage. The unions in BWI sectors were critical of the government's actions arguing that the government should have agreed a short-time work allowance not forcing workers to take unpaid leave.

In the Ukraine, the government stated that all employers should strictly comply with the Labour Code and not dismiss workers or make them take unpaid leave although it was not strictly enforced. PROFUD was able to negotiate with employers in the cement and building materials sector for telework options where feasible, but many employers requested that previously agreed wage increases be postponed. However, in Moldova, almost all construction sites were closed and SINDICONS reported that workers were laid off without wages

In Russia, the government ordered a one week lock-down from 15 April, which was extended to mid-May, and all workers in non-essential industries were placed on paid leave. President Putin stated workers would receive their full wage during the lockdown but in most cases, employers announced a temporary shut down and paid two-thirds of wages as stipulated in the Labour Code. Most companies in construction, wood and



in forestry continued to operate; some announced a temporary shutdown and paid two-thirds of wages, and in some cases, such as IKEA, workers were paid their full wage. The Russian timber workers' union stated it would contest any cases of dismissals or employers forcing workers to take unpaid leave or terminate employment contracts. They called on unions at company level to immediately inform State authorities and the national trade union centre if workers were forced to take unpaid leave or threatened with dismissal. However, the government announced a return to work on 11 May with immediate effect from the next day on condition that safety measures are respected. Unions and workers were placed in a difficult position as they had been previously informed that the lockdown would continue until the end of May.

2. Health and safety at the workplace

Recent studies have revealed the sombre fact that construction and building materials workers are almost four times more likely to die from COVID-19 than professional white-collar workers. Because of prior occupational exposure to dust, chemicals, diesel and welding fumes and others, they suffer from particularly high rates of respiratory disease and suppressed immune response.⁹ For that reason, BWI and its affiliates have been at the forefront to support public health measures to contain the spread of the infection and to ensure that all necessary health and safety measures are in place to protect the workforce.

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work issued a detailed guidance on COVID-19 and how to adapt workplaces and protect workers.¹⁰ It includes a section on the construction sector, including on a risk assessment and how to implement a hierarchy of controls, to eliminate the risk or minimise worker exposure. The European Construction Industry Federation (FIEC) and other construction associations issued a joint statement with the EFBWW, BWI's independent partner organisation, stating that in 'our industry, it is possible to maintain activity while protecting workers' health and complying with enhanced sanitary emergency requirements.' The EFBWW also issued a joint statement with the wood and furniture industry associations calling for clear occupational health and safety guidance and the involvement of workers and their representatives in the planning and implementation of all related measures.

At national level, within the EU, many countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Italy, Netherlands, Germany and Spain) engaged in tripartite or bipartite discussions leading to protocols or other agreements concerning working during the COVID-19 crisis or the resumption of work where a lockdown and closures had occurred. Issues reviewed included social distancing measures, regular disinfection of sites and communal spaces, appropriate Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) including masks, safety glasses and gloves, introduction of shift work

⁹According to figures released by UK's National Office of Statistics, May 11 2020

¹⁰https://oshwiki.eu/wiki/COVID-19:_Back_to_the_workplace_-_Adapting_workplaces_and_protecting_workers

and staggered working times; exemptions from work for workers in 'at risk' groups and other measures, concerning canteens, worker accommodation and transport facilities. Social distancing was variously placed at between 1.5 metres and 2 metres, including in the provision of transport. However, in many countries in Western Europe and other sub-regions, unions have reported that the protocols are inadequately enforced.

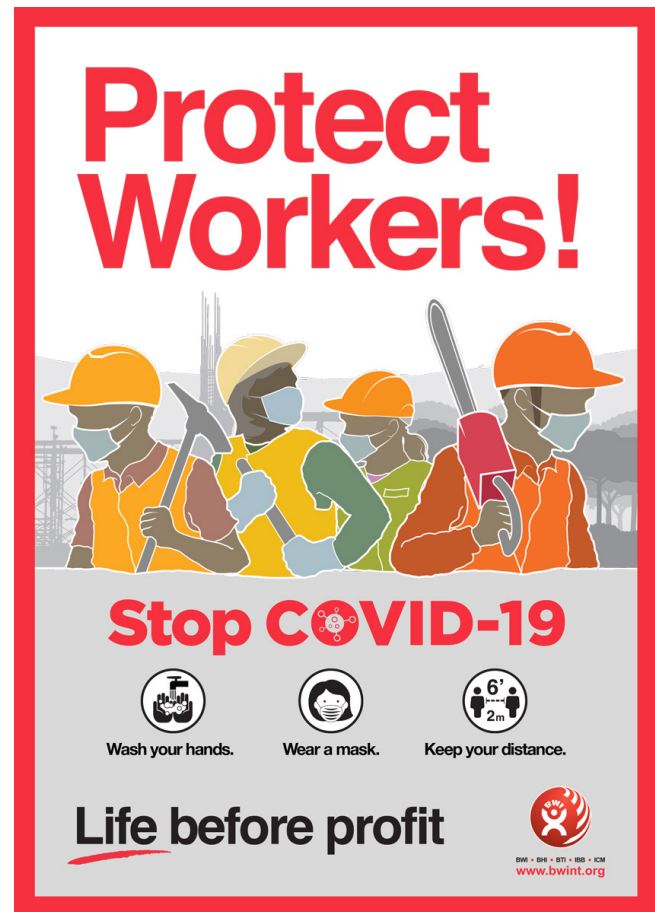
In Norway, the Federation of Norwegian Construction Industries issued regular recommendations concerning infection control and prevention with a recommended 2 metre distance between persons, a coronavirus representative on each site, restrictions on physical meetings; limitations on numbers of persons using changing rooms and sanitary facilities; suspension of canteens; disinfection of facilities; use of hand sanitiser and other hygiene measures. The guidelines underlined the need for cooperation with workers' representatives.

In Belgium, the social partners agreed a joint protocol in order to resume construction work from 4 May, which included social distancing measures and the right to refuse work if a COVID-19 case was detected on site or if a worker belongs to an 'at risk' group. The measures are monitored by a Committee for the Prevention and Protection at Work or by a trade union delegation. In France, a good practice guide written by the Professional Organisation for Building and Public Works, which was subsequently validated by the government, provides advice to companies on how to resume work safely. However, some unions voiced concerns that the guide was not precise enough and there was a lack of testing for workers entering the site. Unions have negotiated specific plans at company and site level.

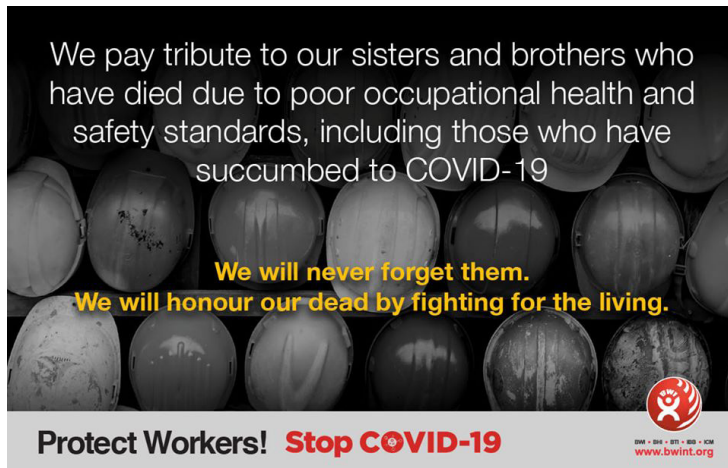
In the Netherlands, a 'corona' supervisor was appointed at each construction site to monitor employers' compliance with a tripartite agreement on 'how to work safely in construction'. However, a survey of over 1000 construction workers carried out in early May by the Dutch construction union, FNV Bouwen en Wonen, found that 36% of those surveyed stated it was not possible to comply with the 1.5 metre social distancing rules on worksites and there were too few hand washing facilities to comply with the new regulations. According to 19% of those surveyed, no additional protection measures were currently in place. The union has called for the labour inspectorate to take urgent action to enforce the tripartite agreement.¹¹ In Spain, the industry association, the CNC and the construction unions, FICA-UGT and CyS-CCOO issued a joint occupational health and safety guide.

With regards to access to health insurance and sickness benefits, several countries have implemented policies to extend health insurance and sickness benefits to groups previously excluded, including the self-employed or informal workers in the context of COVID-19. For example, in Finland, a sickness benefit for those affected by the COVID-19 (or prescribed by a doctor to go into self-isolation) is paid both to employees and self-employed accounting for the full loss of income and with no waiting period, to a sick employee or self-employed. In Israel, employers were required to provide health insurance coverage for Palestinian construction workers from 4 May as they are now required to spend extended periods of time in Israel as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions.

In Turkey, YOL-IS demanded that employers implement protective measures, including social distancing in canteens, locker rooms and accommodation facilities, temperature checks and half occupancy in transport



¹¹Source: Erna Bosschart, 06 May 2020, FNV 'construction protocol is insufficiently observed according to survey by members' available in Dutch at <https://www.fnv.nl/nieuwsbericht/sectornieuws/bouwen-en-wonen/2020/05/fnv-schakelt-inspectie-s-w-in-protocol-bouw-wordt>



vehicles. TARIN-ORMAN-IS, the civil servants' union of agriculture, forestry and environment services, published a poster on measures to prevent infection and union representatives have been monitoring conditions in the field operations. From December, the government has almost tripled the annual production targets and many untrained sub-contracted workers have been hired. By the beginning of May, COVID-19 had claimed the lives of six workers and the union reports there has been a major increase in work-related fatalities.

In Ukraine, the unions have been pro-active in demanding that workers in critical infrastructure

projects that were not shutdown received adequate PPE and had safe transport facilities. For example, in the city of Lviv, PROFUD appealed to the city council authorities and regional police to ensure that PPE, safe transportation and hand sanitiser were provided to building workers.

In Kazakhstan, the Building and Communal Workers Trade Union reported that from 20 April all sites resumed under strict COVID-19 measures including daily screening of workers. In Kyrgyzstan, the union organised a webinar to inform members about safety measures and the COVID-19 emergency has acted as a spur to revive labour inspections that had previously almost stopped. In some countries, however, such as in Georgia, although the union has distributed information about COVID-19 safety measures to workers, it has been denied access to sites to carry out safety inspections. In Russia, in the forestry and wood sectors, the Russian Timber Workers' Union reported that it had been able to set up bipartite anti-virus safety committees.

3. International Framework Agreements and engaging multinational companies

On 26 March, BWI General Secretary sent a letter to the major construction multinational companies (MNCs), in particular those with which it had signed an International Framework Agreement, to encourage good practice in the protection of workers in response to the threats posed by COVID19. BWI urged the companies to recognise their duty of care and to carry out due diligence for all workers in business and value chains, including in contracts with suppliers, prioritising the rights and welfare of these workers. ENGIE, the French energy company, which is currently negotiating an IFA with BWI and other global unions, agreed to extend a minimum social protection to all its employees worldwide to cover full hospital treatment and a life insurance and extend the coverage to those who have been put on paid leave until the end of the year. In Croatia, in the case of the French construction company, Bouygues, unions put pressure on the company to provide additional PPE for workers. In the Ukraine, in two plants that were formerly owned by the Heidelberg Cement Group, unions were able to oppose measures to force workers to take unpaid holiday leave. Instead, the company agreed to provide workers with 65% of their wages for the lockdown period, provide additional PPE and transport services, as well as thermal scanners at the plant entrance. In Russia, a group of over 100 Turkish migrant workers in accommodation near a building site for the IKEA-owned Mega Dybenko shopping centre in St Petersburg contracted COVID-19. BWI raised concerns about the sanitary conditions on sites and in workers' living quarters with the main contractor, the Swedish Ingka Group, which has committed to ensuring strict adherence to all government sanitary guidance and quarantine measures.

4. Support for migrant workers

In Europe, many cross border, posted and migrant workers benefit from equal status with nationals in terms of employment and social protection, in law if not always in practice. However, with the closure of borders or quarantine provisions for returning workers, many migrant workers found they were suddenly second-class citizens, forced to return to their country of origin and unable to access employment protection or wage subsidy schemes offered in their country of work. Unions have sought to provide information to migrant workers about the different employment protection and wages subsidy schemes in the languages of migrant workers and where necessary, have called for equal access to these programmes for migrant workers. They have denounced the opportunistic scapegoating of migrant workers and refugees by xenophobic right-wing political groups.

In Denmark, 3F/CO issued a leaflet in the main languages used by migrant workers about the tripartite agreement to prevent redundancies and reported they were not aware of discriminatory practices against migrant workers. In Norway, according to Fellesforbundet, many migrant workers returned to their country of origin. However, they face discrimination as they are required to be in Norway to access unemployment benefits. The union is negotiating with the government so that when the migrant workers return, they will be able to access the same benefits as other workers.

In Belgium, many posted workers returned home and therefore did not benefit from the unemployment social security provisions provided by the government and industry insurance funds. In France, the FNCFB-CFDT reported on 30 April that some migrant workers were in lockdown in very difficult conditions while others had returned to their country of origin and until restrictions were lifted, were blocked there. In Italy, FILLEA-CGIL issued an information letter in various languages to explain what benefits migrant workers can access during the COVID-19 crisis. The union cautioned migrant workers not to leave the country without proper notification to their employer as they are entitled to continued compensation for a three-month period. Furthermore, on May 13, the government of Italy granted six-month residency permits for undocumented workers in agriculture and the care sectors who were continuing to work during the COVID-19 emergency. In Poland, Budowlani reported that 10,000 Ukrainian construction workers returned home following the emergency measures and closure of the borders. However, from 4 May, it is now possible for cross-border workers to travel to work. In Portugal, the government took the humane decision to approve all pending processes for the legalisation of foreign nationals or asylum seekers during the state of emergency and to extend the validity of all work and residence authorisation documents. In Serbia, there is both an outflow of workers to other European countries and an inflow of workers, largely from Turkey. SRGMIGM reported that they face challenges to organise the migrant workforce and that even during the COVID-19 emergency, the labour inspectorate claimed it was not authorised to monitor working conditions on sites operated by foreign companies.

In Israel, employers were required to provide health insurance coverage for Palestinian construction workers from 4 May as they are now required to spend at least three weeks in Israel before returning home as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions. In addition, the regulations for accommodation have been upgraded and there will be additional labour inspections to ensure compliance of health protocols on sites and in the accommodation facilities.

5. On humanitarian actions

Many unions have found ways to support the health services or workers and others in the community at risk. For example, YOL-IS, the Turkish Union of Road Construction and Building Workers, decided at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis to open their hotels, guest houses and social facilities in several cities to health workers so they could stay near the hospitals and thereby reduce the risks of infection within their households. On the other hand, the Turkish General Directorate of Forestry requested the workforce to contribute one third of one month's salary to a government COVID-19 fund, threatening those who refused. TARIM ORMAN-IS submitted an official complaint to protect workers' rights.

After the earthquakes in Albania in November 2019 and in Croatia in March 2020, construction workers have continued to repair houses and other buildings that had left many people homeless and living in tents. Despite bad weather conditions, and the need to take additional measures to protect from COVID-19, the work has continued. SGH in Croatia reported there were two fatal accidents during roof repairs in April in Zagreb. In paying tribute to the workers, the union called for urgent measures to improve OHS standards to ensure safe work.





6. On organising and member retention




The ETUC issued guidance on the operation of European Works Councils during the COVID-19 crisis, and recommended that extraordinary meetings be held via video conferencing in order to discuss the situation. It recalled that no decisions on restructuring, downsizing or job losses should be made without prior information, consultation and participation of workers and trade union representatives. EWC delegates were encouraged to share information about the situation in each of the countries where the company operates and to request regular updates from management in writing and for each country on the situation. For instance at Lafarge-Holcim, the EWC drafted a list of questions to management and has requested weekly updates.

BWI affiliates have sought to ensure mechanisms for effective information, consultation and decision-making were put in place. Unions set up dedicated information networks, using social media, telephone hotlines and SMS, to keep members informed on the overall health situation and the impact of government measures on the workplace and how to access different government compensation schemes. Many union information and advice services were also provided in the main languages used by the migrant workforce. Unions have also sought to maintain contact with members, through providing advice on safety measures and through practical support, such as the distribution of additional PPE, such as face masks. However, because of the prohibitions on meetings, unions have faced many organisational challenges, including the difficulty of negotiating collective agreements, and organising any protest or strike actions. In addition, because of the increase in unemployment in BWI sectors, some unions are facing loss of dues income at a time when resources are urgently needed.

In Austria, every GBH union member received regular updates on the COVID-19 emergency as SMS messages on their phone. In cooperation with the Chamber of Commerce, the Austrian trade union centre, OGN, produced a video to explain how to apply for the short-time work compensation scheme. Because of the high proportion of informal workers in the construction sector in Ukraine, working in alarming conditions with little or no protection from COVID-19, PROBUD decided to extend support to all workers regardless of whether they had a registered work contract. Some unions have offered free union membership to those who are temporarily unemployed. For example, in Denmark, 3F/CO provided free union membership for any unemployed member for the three month period from March 2020.

Matrix of Actions relative to the 7 BWI Convergences

BWI Convergence	Summary of Actions and Outputs Relative to COVID-19 Pandemic
	Unions have participated in differing degrees in the drawing up of government schemes or signed bipartite or tripartite agreements for job retention during the lockdown period, including moratoriums on dismissals or unpaid leave; wage subsidy schemes for companies to retain workers over the period, with support from unemployment funds which have been extended to cover more groups of workers, including those on temporary contracts. Special measures have been introduced in some countries to protect the incomes of the self-employed or provide cash transfers to the most vulnerable.
	Unions have been active in calling for new industry protocols or guidance to protect workers in all BWI sectors during the COVID-19 emergency, including in disseminating information about the virus and the enhanced safety measures. Unions have set up company and site occupational and health safety measures and monitored compliance with the appointment of dedicated 'coronavirus' site delegates. Where necessary, unions have acted promptly to denounce unsafe work conditions with local authorities and labour inspectorates, such as in Lviv, Ukraine.
	In many countries, apprentices were affected by the closure of vocational training schools. In some EU countries, such as Austria, apprentices were included in job protection and wage subsidy schemes, IG-BAU and IG-Metal in Germany called on the government to protect apprentices as some were facing the threat of dismissal. They reminded employers that German law stipulates that companies should continue to pay full training allowances for up to six weeks even without work and that training could continue through on-line courses. Many unions called on governments to promote apprenticeships to support the economic recovery.
	Pregnant women are considered among the group of workers particularly at risk during the COVID-19 crisis. In some countries, unions negotiated that workers at risk would be given paid leave. The BWI European Women's Committee called for women representatives to be included in all COVID-19 response planning and negotiations and for multinational companies to provide support for women working throughout their supply chains. In Italy, the government provided a special parental leave grant for two-parent households with children under 12 years old or an alternative childcare allowance. In Poland, there was a paid leave provision for working parents whose children were at home because of school closures. In Switzerland, the union has raised the issue of increased domestic violence as a result of the lockdown.

	<p>On 15 April, BWI President, Per Olof Sjö, called for government recovery plans to focus on creating sustainable economies. On 24 April, the European wood and furniture industry associations issued a joint statement with EFBWW, stating that wood and wooden products are the most appropriate basis for a circular and recycling oriented economy and that public procurement oriented towards a low-carbon timber construction will play a vital role in the European green recovery.</p>
	<p>In May 2020, the Paris Olympics Committee, Solidéo, reaffirmed its commitment to the 2018 social charter signed by five unions and industry associations and stated that the COVID-19 crisis would not result in any backtracking on environmental and social standards. At the beginning of May, the Olympic Village site in Seine-Saint-Denis, Paris, operated by Eiffage and Prodemo, resumed work. Union representatives from the two companies reported that the companies were not complying with the tripartite protocol requiring additional sanitary precautions or social distancing measures for transport facilities and locker rooms. They added it was objectively impossible to carry out some tasks on the sites and maintain social distancing. They noted that this situation was unfortunately not very different from other sites which were starting up again.¹²</p>
	<p>On 26 March, BWI urged MNCs to recognise their duty of care and to carry out due diligence for all workers in business and value chains, including in contracts with suppliers, prioritising the rights and welfare of these workers. ENGIE, the French energy company, which is currently negotiating an IFA with BWI and other global unions, agreed to extend a minimum social protection to all its employees worldwide to cover full hospital treatment and a life insurance and extend the coverage to those who have been put on paid leave until the end of the year. In Croatia, in the case of the French construction company, Bouygues, unions put pressure on the company to provide additional PPE.</p>

D. PROSPECTS FOR THE BWI INDUSTRIES

1. Union proposals for government policies

Unions argue there can be no return to 'normal' after the COVID-19 crisis because 'normal' was part of the problem. The Italian union, FILLEA-CGIL, has pointed out that the meaning of 'crisis' in ancient Greek is 'choice' and the COVID-19 crisis should also be viewed as a time to seek new solutions to problems that existed before the crisis. The BWI sectors will be crucial for the post-COVID-19 recovery by creating added-value jobs and contributing to the recovery of local economies. It is also an opportunity to 'press the restart button' and transform the region into a carbon neutral economy by 2050 based on a sustainable built environment.¹³ In this sense, trade unions in Europe have called for a new economic model: more resilient, more protective and more inclusive, built around the transition towards the European Green Deal and a climate-neutral economy.

Arguing that the technologies and strategies are largely in place, unions have joined a broader alliance of cross-party politicians, business and financial leaders, working to promote the necessary post-COVID-19 action plans and investments at local, national and regional level.¹⁴ The European Commission's energy commissioner has called for an EU building 'renovation' wave, scheduled to launch in September 2020, aiming to target in the first place hospitals, schools and SMEs.¹⁵ Many governments are already considering how to accelerate funding for public infrastructure, new housing and renovation projects so that construction, using sustainable materials and design, can act as the foundation of economic recovery programmes. The EFBWW and European wood and furniture industry associations have emphasised the importance of wood and wooden products as the most appropriate basis for a circular and recycling-oriented economy, taking into account the commitments of the European Green Deal, the Circular Economy Action Plan and the 'Renovation Wave'.¹⁶ The joint statement calls for governments to invest in public procurement projects oriented at low-carbon timber construction.

In many countries however there are serious concerns about the long-term consequences of the COVID-19 emergency. For example, countries that have received emergency loan facilities from the European Commission

¹²https://www.lemonde.fr/sport/article/2020/05/09/bernard-thibault-deux-entreprises-ont-recommence-le-travail-pour-les-jo-2024_6039139_3242.html

¹³FIEC-EBC-Construction Products Europe Joint Declaration: 'European Recovery Fund: The construction ecosystem as priority with at least €320B dedicated budget' April 30 2020 available at: <http://www.fiec.eu/en/cust/documentrequest.aspx?DocID=48672>

¹⁴Green Recovery Deal: Reboot and reboost our economies for a sustainable future– call for action

¹⁵<https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/eu-building-renovation-wave-set-for-launch-in-september/>

¹⁶EOS, EIB, EFIC, EFP & EFBWW, UEA 'Covid-19: To fight the Corona pandemic the European Wood and Furniture Industries propose measures to protect the workers' health, support economic activity and the sector's recovery' 24 April 2020 available at: <https://www.efbww.eu/publications-and-downloads/press-releases/covid-19-efbww-info-from-and-for-efbww-affiliates/481-a>

or the IMF, such as Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina and North Macedonia, unions have voiced concerned that these loans may only fuel existing problems of corruption and non-transparent public procurement and accelerate the out-migration of the workforce.

On the other hand, in South East Europe and Ukraine, unions are considering how to take advantage of the return of many thousands of skilled construction workers, who were working as migrant labour abroad to strengthen the decent work agenda for the industry. Because of high levels of out-migration, there is a skills shortage in many construction sectors and governments have resorted to secretive bilateral temporary migration schemes. For example, in Albania, the government adopted a law in the hope that workers from Asia and Africa will now work in construction. In Serbia, there are many Turkish construction workers, employed by sub-contractors, on precarious contracts and with insufficient training, leading to high levels of accidents and fatalities. Unions are arguing that in this context, if the construction sector offered decent pay and conditions, the skilled nationals would prefer to remain in their country of origin and stay with their families rather than return to their former country of work once the COVID-19 crisis lessens. They argue that the construction sector, the post-COVID-19 recovery, the economy and society as a whole would benefit. For that reason, the unions are drawing up plans to organise and represent the returned workforce in cooperation with Western European unions.



Both at European and national level, unions are calling for investments in easily accessible training, reskilling and upskilling programmes, including apprenticeships to support the economic recovery. In some countries, such as Romania and Bosnia & Herzegovina, governments have already classified construction as a priority industry and allocated additional funds for vocational training programmes for the construction trades.

Many unions have also called for new measures in relation to government stimulus packages so that they are conditional on job protection, that companies do not register their profits in tax havens or give out dividends to shareholders while workers face a reduction in wages and income. Tax-paid government support given to large companies should also be conditional on verifiable improvement in their sustainable development performance in ways that have positive impacts for workers, the environment and the real economy. For example, UNIA, Switzerland called for a moratorium on all dividend payments if a company received government tax-payer support. This same position was also taken by other countries. On April 16, unions in South East Europe demanded that shareholder dividends be suspended as a sign of solidarity and to preserve the financial health of companies, as a condition for receiving government tax-payer grants or loans.

Other issues raised by some unions refer to government digital contact tracing systems, introduced to control the spread of the infection. Unions together with other civil society organisations are concerned about the potential violation of personal data protection laws which could be abused by authoritarian governments. In Russia, there has been criticism of the lack of any legal basis for the digital authorisation form to leave home that is currently in use in Moscow.

2. Conclusions moving forward

The climate strike scheduled for 15 May was replaced by an on-line campaign #ChallengeForFuture and #CEPOW – Climate-and-Employment-Proof-Our-Work to call for stronger action to tackle the climate emergency, in many ways made more urgent by the COVID-19 pandemic. The campaign calls on the international community, governments and employers to renew commitments to ambitious targets for carbon emission reductions under the Paris Climate Agreement and develop just transition plans, with new investments in renewable resources, and training and re-training for workers in industries affected by the transition. Unions as part of the civil society alliance have emphasised that multilateral, regional and national economic recovery plans in response to the COVID-19 pandemic should not accelerate the climate crisis but instead place sustainable development at the front and centre of policy agendas.

The pandemic has exposed the many weaknesses in public health systems strained by neoliberal cost-containment over the last three decades. The impact of the pandemic has varied significantly both within countries—related to job security, access to health care, housing, migration status—and between countries, as the already devastating impacts of the virus in the wealthier countries are amplified in countries with weaker health systems and social safety nets. The health, social and economic consequences of Covid-19 will require new investments in social care and social protection in all countries.

Covid-19 has shown in the cruellest way that in an interlinked world, no one is protected until all are protected. There has been a convergence of crises: the climate emergency, increasing inequalities and the pandemic, all of which do not recognise national borders. There is a new urgency about public policy debate on many critical issues. Working together, unions are forming part of strong, solidarity-based alliances for collective action to make the world better prepared for future crisis events as stronger societies based on social justice, equality and sustainability.

Johan Lindholm, President of the Swedish Building Workers' Union, President of EFBWW and Vice-President of BWI Pan-Europe region considers that the COVID-19 crisis has clearly exposed how social and economic inequalities throughout the whole region have only deepened and widened since the 2008 financial crisis. He stated: 'The EU strategy of 'flexicurity' failed to deliver for the majority of the workforce but instead created not only a 'precarariat' but also a 'flexcariat'. The inadequate response of the European institutions to the COVID-19 crisis, the deadlock about fundamental social and democratic values on which Europe was built, neo-liberal austerity policies and the focus on profit have all meant unless trade unions take action, it will be the workers who face the full economic impact. We need to involve our members in the debates so as to steer government policies in the right directions so that it will not be the normal people with normal jobs, and especially young, vulnerable and flex-workers, who pay the price.'

BWI is the Global Union Federation grouping free and democratic unions with members in the Building, Building Materials, Wood, Forestry and Allied sectors.

BWI brings together around 334 trade unions representing around 12 million members in 130 countries. The Headquarters is in Geneva, Switzerland while the Regional Offices are in Panama, Malaysia, and South Africa.

Our mission is to defend and advance workers' rights, and to improve working and living conditions in our sectors. The BWI, above all, has a rights-based approach. We believe that trade union rights are human rights and are based on equality, solidarity and democracy, and that trade unions are indispensable to good governance.

BWI goals include 1) to promote and defend human and trade union rights; 2) to increase trade union strength; 3) to promote a stable and high level of employment in our sectors; and 4) to influence policy and strengthen the capacity of institutions and tripartite structures in our sectors.

©2020 Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI). Parts of this publication may be excerpted or cited as long as the source is acknowledged.



**Building and Wood Workers'
International**
Route des Acacias 54, CH-1227
Carouge GE, Switzerland

+41 22 827 37 77

@BWIGlobalUnion

+41 22 827 37 70

@BWIGlobal

peu@bwint.org

www.bwint.org