

SDC CGA statement on Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath: investing in state sector personnel

Brussels, 30 June 2020

The Covid-19 pandemic is having a huge, unprecedented human, social and economic cost in the EU.

As social partners for central government administrations, we express from the outset our gratitude towards the astounding commitment and performance of state employees on the frontline as well as those working online, who fulfil additional, essential public service tasks associated with the pandemic.

We underline the need to invest further in public sector staff.

The protection of workers dealing with the public who are more exposed to the coronavirus infection should supersede all other immediate concerns.

When the acute phase of the pandemic is over, the priority must remain on preventing a second wave by neutralizing the health risk for all workers and the people under their care and society at large, so that gradually safe social and sustainable economic activities can be restored.

The pandemic has thrown in sharp relief the priceless value of public services and the critical role of a democratic welfare state to:

- protect all citizens and workers and uphold fundamental human rights and freedoms, where and when these have been restricted as part of emergency laws, the reasons for doing so must be justified, proportionate, temporary and publicly scrutinised;
- administer, finance and ensure the continuity of all public services, which are all essential for fair society, not least healthcare but also social services, civil protection, education, prisons, waste management, utilities; this is when a whole-of- government approach makes most sense in close consultation of social partners and civil society;
- support workers made redundant or whose jobs are threatened;
- be prepared to respond to such a sanitary crisis by anticipating sufficient staffing levels, the supply and production of personal protective and medical equipment, testing and isolation measures, adapting work premises and supporting teleworking and by putting occupational health and safety to the fore of public health;
- prevent inequalities from deepening further, not least by ensuring access by all residents to quality public healthcare, social services and decent housing, regardless of social status, gender, ethnic origin or migration status;
- foster a climate of trust, protect workers and ensure social dialogue and trade union rights are in place;

As the lockdowns are being gradually lifted and in view of ensuring a safe recovery and prevent new waves of the pandemic, we (re)affirm:

- as part of a sustained effort on the part of governments to suppress, control and prevent the deadly virus, the importance of a much sharper focus on occupational health and safety and inequalities as an integral part of public health and effective responses to health emergencies;
- in the run-up to a fair recovery for all and EU coordination through the Semester, the need to maintain central the renewed recognition of the vital role of the public sector in dealing with a pandemic; far from being an hindrance, it has been once more time well-tested that a public administration is an asset to support governments, citizens and business;
- that what constitutes a public administration is its employees, whose work and dedication for the general interest must be supported, better valued and expanded;
- that buffers and “spare capacity-building” represent the best prevention and response to a sanitary crisis;
- that public sector employees must be valued as part of the economic recovery, and that, accordingly, public investment in the public sector and its personnel will be critical to reduce inequalities and unemployment and to a social, environment-friendly, economic recovery;
- related to the above, the importance of fiscal sustainability for a well-functioning democratic welfare state;
- that the best way to protect citizens in public institutions, closed or open, not least those in a vulnerable situation is to protect the employees and civil servants charged with their care; therefore these workers must be prioritized in terms of protective equipment, Covid-19 testing programmes, adapted working time and work/life balance, and avoiding, to the maximum possible extent, overtime, which is a serious health risk factor;
- the proven value of social dialogue and/or collective bargaining including on occupational health and safety measures, and of regular, factual, clear information and timely consultation with staff and their trade union representatives to protect exposed employees and civil servants;
- social partners’ responsibility to ensure that all health risk preventive measures be taken and maintained over time, in close consultation of the personnel and trade union representatives as well as occupational doctors, before lifting or easing of the lockdowns at each stage of the gradual resumption of activity;
- the employer’s duty to ensure that all workers feel and be safe and protected to continue or return to work, proper attention be paid to commuting time, and to avoid risks of overburdening public healthcare and public transport if too many people return to work at the same time and to finding alternatives, in consultation or negotiation with the trade unions;

- the importance of fairer wages, not least for those on low income and at greater health risks, and of equal pay and pay transparency.
- amid welcome appraisal of public sector workers who have shown their dedication, resilience and flexibility on the frontlines or teleworking throughout the pandemic, our determination to work jointly to end all unjustified exemptions from EU minimum social standards with a view to ensure equal treatment with other workers, in line with the EU pillar of social rights;
- accordingly, our long-standing request to the EU Commission to implement by a legislative proposal for adoption in Council the SDC CGA agreement on workers' rights to information and consultation, not least on restructuring, which now appears all the more legitimate and relevant, with information and consultation rights of workers' representatives at times of crisis being more important than ever;
- the urgency of drawing lessons, in consultation with the personnel and their trade union representatives, from daily teleworking and the impact of digital tools, as part of the lockdown measures, on occupational health and safety, job content, work/life balance, access to internet and IT equipment as well as on the quality of and access to public administrations online;
- our commitment, as EU social partners for central/federal government administrations to the protection of citizens and workers, public sector values, and the EU social and democratic project, which has never been more valid than today.