

## How the EU improves workers' rights and working conditions



The EU wants to improve working conditions ©AP Images/European Union-EP

**Find out how the EU is improving workers' rights and working conditions across Europe, from working hours and parental leave to health and safety at work.**

The EU has put in place a set of labour rules to ensure strong social protection. They include minimum requirements on working conditions - such as wages, working time, part-time work, workers' rights - to information about important aspects of their employment and the posting of workers. They have become one of the cornerstones of [Europe's social policies](#).

### Working conditions

#### Working hours

The EU has introduced minimum common standards on [working hours](#) applicable to all member states. EU legislation in the field of working time establishes individual rights for all workers, with a maximum working week of 48 hours, paid annual leave of at least four weeks per year, rest periods and rules on night work, shift work and patterns of work.

## Protection for new forms of employment

Over the years, Europe has witnessed significant changes in the labour market, including digitalisation and the development of new technologies, growing flexibility and fragmentation of work. These developments have generated new forms of employment, with an increase in temporary positions and non-standard jobs.

To protect all workers in the EU and improve the rights of the most vulnerable employees on atypical contracts, MEPs adopted in 2019 new rules introducing minimum rights on working conditions.

The legislation sets protective measures such as:

- limiting the length of the probationary period to six months
- introducing free mandatory training and
- banning restrictive contracts

In April 2024, [Parliament approved new rules](#) to improve the conditions for [workers on digital platforms](#), such as Uber and Deliveroo. The rules aim to:

- correct the employment status of workers that may have been misclassified as self-employed
- regulate the use of algorithms and AI to track or manage employees, so that workers cannot be fired based on a decision taken by AI or algorithms
- better protect workers' data - personal data and exchanges with colleagues may not be processed.

## Teleworking

Although teleworking has increased efficiency and flexibility for employers and employees, it has also blurred the distinction between work and private life. To ensure that the extended use of digital tools do not hamper employees' rights, Parliament has been calling for an EU-wide law [allowing them to disconnect from work](#) during non-work hours without consequences. MEPs also want minimum standards for remote work.

### Further information

[Read more on how Parliament wants to ensure people have the right to disconnect from work](#)

## Minimum wages

In 2017, the EU confirmed its commitment to ensuring a fair income for all workers. In September 2022, MEPs adopted the first EU legislation for adequate [minimum wages](#).

Countries may use different criteria to assess whether wages are adequate - for example, they may compare wages to a national basket of goods and services, or compare them to widely-used reference values such as 60% of the gross median wage or 50% of the gross average wage. The rules also aim to [promote and enforce collective bargaining](#) and protect workers' rights.



The EU has introduced minimum common standards on working hours ©AP Images/European Union-EP

## Workers' health and safety

The EU adopts legislation in the field of [health and safety at work](#) to complement and support the activities of member states.

The [European Framework Directive on Safety and Health at Work](#) sets general principles

related to minimum health and safety requirements. It applies to nearly all sectors of public and private activity and defines obligations for employers and employees.

Additionally, there are specific rules covering exposure to dangerous substances, groups of workers such as pregnant women and young workers, specific tasks such as the manual handling of loads and workplaces such as fishing vessels.

For example, the directive on the protection of workers from the risks related to [carcinogens or mutagens](#) at work is updated regularly, setting exposure limits for specific substances. In 2022, MEPs succeeded in including substances that are harmful to reproductive health in the latest update of the directive. Parliament also adopted specific [rules limiting the exposure to asbestos at work](#). In 2024, Parliament adopted new exposure limit values for lead and other substances that can be dangerous.

EU countries are free to set more stringent standards when transposing EU directives into national law.

With an ageing workforce, the risk of developing health problems has increased. In 2018, MEPs adopted a report proposing measures to facilitate people's return to the workplace after [long-term sick leave](#) and to better include people who are chronically sick or have a disability in the workforce.

In July 2022, amidst an increase in mental health problems in the EU, Parliament called on EU institutions and countries to [recognise the high level of work-related mental health problems](#) and find ways to help prevent mental health problems.

## Work-life balance and gender equality

The European Parliament has always been a strong defender of [gender equality](#). To provide more equal opportunities for men and women and to encourage a better sharing of caring responsibilities, MEPs adopted in 2019 a set of new rules to allow parents and workers taking care of relatives with serious medical conditions so they could establish [a better work-life balance](#).

The directive sets a minimum of 10 days of paternity leave, a minimum of four months' parental leave per parent (of which two are not transferable) and five days of carers' leave per year and provides for more flexible working arrangements.

Maternity rights are defined in the [Pregnant Workers Directive](#), setting the minimum period for maternity leave at 14 weeks, with two weeks' compulsory leave before and/or after confinement.

Parliament is also continuously pushing for more measures to [combat the gender pay gap](#), narrow the [pension gap](#) and has called for EU rules to tackle [mobbing and sexual harassment](#).

New rules adopted by Parliament in March 2023 force companies to [disclose pay information](#), making it easier for workers to compare salaries and expose gender pay gaps.

## Workers' mobility within the EU

EU rules on the coordination of [member states' social security systems](#) guarantee that people can fully benefit from their right to move to another EU country to study, work or settle whilst getting the social and health benefits they are entitled to. EU legislation covers sickness, maternity/paternity leave, family, unemployment and similar benefits and is currently under review.

In 2019 MEPs approved plans to create a new EU agency, the [European Labour Authority](#), to assist member states and the European Commission in applying and enforcing EU law in the field of labour mobility and coordinating social security systems.

Employees can be sent by their companies to another EU country on a temporary basis to carry out specific tasks. In 2018, EU rules on the [posting of workers](#) were overhauled to ensure the principle of equal pay for equal work at the same place.

To tackle unemployment and better match labour market supply and demand across Europe, Parliament approved a new law to revamp the [European Jobs Network](#) (Eures) with an EU-wide database of job seekers and vacancies in 2016

## Social dialogue

The social partners - trade unions and employers' organisations - are involved in the shaping of European social and employment policies via the so-called [social dialogue](#), through consultations and opinions, and can also negotiate framework agreements on specific matters.

The EU also wants workers to be involved in their company's decision-making and has established a general framework for [the rights of workers to be informed and consulted](#).

EU rules require that in the event of mass redundancies employers must negotiate with workers'

representatives.

At transnational level, employees are represented by European Works Councils. Through these bodies, workers are informed and consulted by management on any significant decision at EU level that could affect employment or working conditions. MEPs want an update of the rules to [strengthen the role of the European Works Councils](#).

## More on EU social policies

- [Reducing unemployment: EU policies explained](#)
- [Youth employment: the EU measures to make it work](#)
- [Improving public health: EU measures explained](#)

### Health and social security

[Briefing](#)