



## ETUC Resolution on defending the rights of workers with disabilities

Adopted at the Executive Committee meeting of 04-05 March 2025

Workers with disabilities remain one of the most disadvantaged groups in the labour market. Their employment rate is only 51.3%, significantly lower than the 74.6% recorded for the general population. The situation is even more concerning for women and young people with disabilities, who face even lower employment rates. Additionally, nearly one in five (17.7%) young people with disabilities (aged 20-26) were unemployed in 2020, doubling the rate of their peers without disabilities (8.6%). Beyond employment rates, the quality of jobs available to workers with disabilities is often precarious, with many forced into unstable and underpaid jobs. Discriminatory practices remain widespread, both in accessing and retaining employment, with intersectional discrimination further complicating these challenges, particularly for persons belonging to different categories of vulnerable groups and facing multiple and overlapping forms of bias. A 2019 Eurobarometer survey found that more than half (52%) of people with disabilities felt discriminated against due to their condition. Precarious working conditions and discrimination have led to nearly one in three (28.8%) people with disabilities being at risk of poverty or social exclusion, compared with 18% of the general population.

We acknowledge not all persons with a disability use this language to describe themselves or to self-identify. We use this language as it is the language of the EU and UN but respect and acknowledge the language persons with a disability use in each nation to self-describe as is their right

ETUC has addressed employment-related issues within the [Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030](#), focusing on the European Disability Card and the employment package.

We expressed general agreement with the content of the package. At the same time, we also stressed that addressing the identified challenges through mere guidelines that rely on the goodwill of employers to fulfil their obligations toward workers with disabilities is not enough. The EU must take steps to ensure that people with disabilities who want to work are able to do so. At the same time, we must acknowledge that not all people with disabilities are able to work, and we should not force this group into employment.

This is why we call on the EU to commit to developing binding initiatives to improve the working and living conditions of persons with disabilities.

ETUC is deeply concerned about the European Commission's recent decision to transfer the disability portfolio from the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs, and Inclusion to the Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers. This shift diminishes the strategy's employment-related prerogatives, which is particularly concerning as employment has yielded the least tangible results within the overall initiative. It also hinders social partners' capacity to contribute to the strategy's design, implementation, and assessment.

Additionally, ETUC regrets the lack of a mid-term consultation—including consultation with social partners—on the aforementioned strategy. Such an exercise is crucial to



amending the strategy's deployment in its later phases and providing tangible improvements for workers with disabilities and their families.

In order to improve the working conditions of workers with disabilities and their integration into the labour market, ETUC calls for the following demands and identifies the areas where further actions are needed:

ETUC calls for revising the EU Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the employment package. The revision must identify the areas for future interventions at the national and EU levels.

**Providing reasonable accommodation for workers with disabilities:** The EU Directive 2000/78/EC, which establishes a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation, requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations in the workplace for employees with disabilities. This is both a right for the worker and an obligation for the employer that must be enforced. Collective bargaining and social dialogue between employers and trade unions play a pivotal role in negotiating and implementing measures for reasonable accommodation in the workplace for persons with disabilities. ETUC has compiled best practices demonstrating how collective bargaining and social dialogue can provide reasonable accommodation for persons with disabilities across various countries and industrial sectors. The adaptation of working time can also serve as a means of providing reasonable accommodation in the workplace.

**Improving the functioning of sheltered workshops:** ETUC acknowledges that sheltered workshops in some Member States provide quality job opportunities and additional social services for persons with disabilities. However, ETUC is deeply concerned about the varying quality of these arrangements, which may compromise labour rights and broader human rights in some European countries. Sheltered workshops must not become avenues for discriminatory practices. **Workers in sheltered workshops should receive wages that are at least equal to the minimum wage and to those specified in the collective agreement applicable to the sector.** These facilities should be adequately equipped to provide professional counselling and training to their workers. Public funding, including EU funding, should support these workshops, while fines should be imposed on companies that fail to respect their labour obligations. Sheltered workshops should serve as stepping stones toward integration into the open labour market. Professional staff with good working conditions should actively support and facilitate this pathway while acknowledging that transition may not be feasible for all individuals within the group of workers with disabilities. The crucial role of public employment services in assisting sheltered workshops and monitoring working conditions requires adequate funding.

The autonomy and self-determination of persons with disabilities should be guaranteed, ensuring that they are free to make their own choices regarding their participation in the labour market and society as a whole, without decisions being imposed on them. This includes the full exercise of their labour rights, including trade union rights

**Ensuring compatibility of wages and disability entitlements:** Disability entitlements are fundamental support systems providing for the additional costs associated with disabilities. Ensuring the continuity and compatibility of these entitlements with wages is essential for a decent quality of life.

**Ensuring retention and prevention of chronic diseases:** ETUC emphasises the importance of the precautionary principle, as enshrined in the EU's occupational safety and health acquis, which holds employers liable for undertaking a risk assessment of the workplace and implementing preventive measures to ensure safety and health at work. Employers must comply with their obligations regarding the prevention of occupational accidents and diseases, as established under the European OSH legislative acquis. This includes consulting with trade unions and adhering to the hierarchy of preventive



measures. Collective bargaining and social dialogue remain indispensable in supplementing these preventive efforts. Trade unions and collective bargaining agreements are vital tools for retaining workers with chronic diseases and preventing occupational health risks. Moreover, the Framework Agreement on Active Ageing and an Inter-generational Approach includes best practices for retaining workers under quality conditions at the workplace, which are worth considering in the field of chronic diseases. Occupational health services play a critical role in prevention and must remain independent from employers' interests. Their primary function should be prevention rather than solely monitoring health status. Lastly, return-to-work measures for workers with disabilities and/or chronic diseases should be implemented in consultation with trade unions. When workplace conditions cause chronic disease or accidents, return-to-work measures should be delayed until the causes are addressed. Given that it may not be possible to completely eliminate the causes of chronic occupational diseases in all workplaces, every necessary measures must be taken to protect workers. This includes substituting or reducing harmful exposure, and providing workers with suitable resources (such as individual prevention, rehabilitation measures, etc.) to enable them to continue working, if they wish to do so, despite the chronic illness.

**Improving statistics and availability of the data on workers with disabilities.** In early 2024, Eurostat made a database available that facilitates access to comparative European statistics on people with disabilities. This database covers a wide range of areas, including employment access and social participation. However, there is a pressing need for new data collection, particularly regarding the types of disabilities and pathways to the open labour market. Additionally, statistics on persons with disabilities exercising their mobility rights within the EU are lacking. These are critical, given the commitments outlined in the Directive on a European Disability Card. Statistics should be collected and displayed in a manner that respects the confidentiality of personal information and that no individual is forced to disclose such information, ensuring privacy, security, and the protection of personal choice.

**Supporting mobility:** While statistics indicate a limited number of persons with disabilities relocating for employment, pursuing enhanced mobility rights remains crucial for fostering inclusivity and equal opportunities within the European Union. In 2024, the Directive for a European Disability Card was adopted, marking a significant step towards enhancing accessibility and inclusivity across European Member States. While this agreement represents progress, it is imperative to address challenges related to disability entitlements for individuals exercising their right to work and study abroad. ETUC has long advocated for access to disability support and allowances for individuals relocating within the EU. It is disappointing that this specific demand was not incorporated into the agreement. Nonetheless, the European Commission is committed to further research on barriers to freedom of movement. ETUC will continue to advocate for comprehensive measures that promote accessibility, equality, and social justice for all individuals across European Member States.

**Training and skills:** The employment of people with disabilities must prioritize the significant importance of inclusive training. It provides the necessary tools to promote active participation in professional and social life. Greater efforts are needed to strengthen an educational model capable of adopting innovative and inclusive teaching methodologies, including assistive technologies, to facilitate professional education and training for persons with disabilities.

This resolution also relaunches the commitment of the ETUC and its member organisations to be accessible and welcoming to workers with disabilities throughout their structure. It also intensifies the organising efforts of this group and their representation within the trade union structures and governance.

To coordinate the trade union assessment and proposals for the various instruments within the package, ETUC established a trade union taskforce of workers with



disabilities, composed of ETUC members actively involved in organising and protecting workers with disabilities.

ETUC commits to continuing the task force's work and implementing the strategy with the European Disability Forum). It also encourages ETUC member organisations to enhance cooperation between unions and organisations representing disabled people at the national level.

ETUC opposes the decision of the European Commission of withdrawing the Horizontal Anti-Discrimination Directive from the European Commission Work Programme. This piece of legislation should give concreteness to the right to equality, combat intersectional discriminations and contribute to enhancing effective equal opportunities both within and outside workplaces for people with disabilities.