

Informal EPSCO 07/07/2025

Session I Fair labour mobility in the EU: Ensuring high standards for all workers and a level playing field for companies. Intervention of Esther Lynch , General Secretary, ETUC

Ministers, Commissioner, Social Partners,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on behalf of the European Trade Union Confederation and the 45 million workers and their trade unions that we represent.

We are here to talk about fair mobility in the European Union but that conversation is incomplete unless it includes a consideration of the reasons why there are labour shortages, the quality of the jobs, and the rights of third-country nationals.

Third-country nationals come to the EU seeking decent work and better lives. They are the backbone of essential sectors often doing the hardest jobs under the harshest conditions.

Last week, I joined an EFFAT delegation to Borgomezzanone in Puglia, Italy. There, over 2,000 migrant agricultural workers live in makeshift shelters made of scrap metal and tarpaulin. No running water. No sanitation. These workers live under the grip of gangmasters - controlled, exploited, subject to wage theft, working in unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, and denied legal protection or threatened with reprisals and deportation if they speak up.

And this is not an isolated scandal or a few rogue employers. This is organised exploitation. Abuse is the business model and it goes all the way to the top. And it's not confined to agriculture - we see it in construction, transport, logistics, care, hospitality.

As Ministers for Labour and Employment, you know this reality. You see the loopholes in law, the lack of resources for enforcement, the abuse of subcontracting and the impact of intermediaries, the impunity of employers who build their profits on outsourced exploitation.

Trade unions are shut out.
Workers are silenced.

We urge action in four key areas:

1. Equal Treatment: In Law and in Practice

Every third-country national, regardless of migration status, must have equal rights to fair pay, to safe working and living conditions, to union representation. No exceptions. No exclusions.

2. Access to Justice

Justice must be real, not theoretical. That means:

More labour inspectors and more frequent and effective labour inspections, the number of which has fallen significantly in many countries as a result of austerity;

Access to legal support;

Protection from retaliation, including deportation;

Providing the right for trade unions to take 'class actions';
A European Labour Authority with teeth — empowered to impose fines and rules to remove serial offenders from the market;

And crucially: no more impunity. Those at the top must be held responsible for the abuses they profit from, that's why the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive is so important.

3. Close the Loopholes

End the use of letterbox companies, gangmasters, and exploitative subcontracting chains. Regulate labour intermediation, limit subcontracting and enforce joint and several liability in all sectors so that no one can outsource their responsibility.

Ensure that direct employment becomes the norm, not the exception. In this regard, the current proposal for an EU Talent Pool moves in the wrong direction. It ignores the clear evidence that intermediaries in posted work often lead straight to exploitation. In addition it is essential to maintain the prior notification for posting in Regulation 883.

4. Make Social Conditionality Binding

Whether through the Common Agricultural Policy or public procurement rules, all EU and public money must not subsidise abuse. Contracts must go only to companies that provide quality, direct jobs, with collective agreements, fair wages, and decent conditions.

Those who exploit, abuse subcontracting, or turn a blind eye must be excluded.

These are not radical demands. They are the minimum standards needed to ensure fair competition — and to uphold the values the EU was built upon.

Ministers, your leadership matters.

You have the tools — through legislation, enforcement, and your voice in the EU Council to ensure that every worker, regardless of origin, is treated with dignity and respect. And that every worker's right to organise is protected.

We call on you to halt the proposals to remove guardrails arriving with the fleet of omnibus as this will allow exploitation to persist and grow. Fair mobility will be turned into a driver on the race to the bottom. You should not allow calls for competitiveness to become a cover for injustice.

Fair mobility must be a two-way promise: Opportunity for workers. Responsibility from employers and governments.

Decent employers have nothing to fear from strong labour rights. In fact, fair mobility protects workers and rewards fair employers. Social dumping is cheating and it drags everyone down.

Real growth does not come from lowering standards but from lifting them. Not from undermining collective agreements but by protecting them.

This is not only about fairness for migrant workers. When one group can be underpaid, overworked, and silenced, standards fall for everyone.

Allowing a vulnerable exploited class of workers to grow reduces support for mobility and allows some to shamefully blame the migrant workers instead of the unscrupulous employers who are responsible.

The ETUC stands ready to work with you.
But we ask you to take decisive action.
Because the future of fair mobility depends on it.

Thank you