

Our care workers deserve more than just applause

Across Europe, care workers have been on the frontline of the fight against Covid-19. Now, their demands should guide the post-pandemic recovery

Across Europe, care workers have been on the frontline of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, as recently published country reports from nine European countries and regions show, they have been more exposed to and less protected from the virus than most other workers. The deficiencies in elderly care in particular – like precarious working conditions, understaffing, and underfunding – were devastating for the ability to protect the most vulnerable during the Covid-19 pandemic: the elderly.

Trade unions have protested these shortcomings for years – and fought successfully for better protection, working conditions, and, ultimately, elderly care during the pandemic. Now, as European heads of state or government, EU institutions, social partners and other key stakeholders will meet at the European Social Summit in Porto on 7 May, we expect the experiences and demands of care workers to become a central pillar of the post-pandemic recovery.

In all countries covered by the report, care workers on the frontlines have suffered from shortages of personal protective equipment and lack of clear guidelines for when and how it should be used. In Sweden, 37 per cent of elder care workers reported having worked without adequate PPE, and still in May 2020, 51 per cent were worried about the lack of PPE. Care workers in Finland had to use raincoats and were instructed to craft face masks from tissue paper.

In all countries, pre-existing shortages of staff worsened further during the crisis, increasing the already unbearable workload of elderly care workers. When the pandemic hit in Norway, ‘the elderly care services were already cut to the bone’, to quote the Norwegian Union of Municipal and General Employees *Fagforbundet*.

In all countries, care workers suffered from increased physical and mental pressure, and there are reports of a dramatic increase in the incidence of burnouts, depressions and substance abuse. In Spain, employees had to work 12-14 hours long shifts and did often not even have time to take lunch breaks.

Although elderly care workers were forced to work harder and more overtime than ever before, they were left with precarious working conditions, many on zero-hour contracts and paid by the hour.

In Portugal, where some employees had to work 14 days in a row, almost three quarters of care workers reported they experienced anxiety and 14.6 per cent suffered from depressions. In the UK, one in two workers felt that their mental health declined during the pandemic, 35 per cent used alcohol to cope with work-related stress, 56 per cent reported that they were emotionally exhausted and 63 per cent had difficulties sleeping.

Trade unions were fighting for care workers and the elderly

Although elderly care workers were forced to work harder and more overtime than ever before, they were left with precarious working conditions, many on zero-hour contracts and paid by the hour. When they were ill, many were left without adequate sick pay. In Scotland, 52 per cent were paid less than 100 pounds a week or nothing at all if they needed to shield or self-isolate. In Germany, part-time care workers who have temporary contracts with few working hours only had access to sick pay for the first six weeks of illness. In Sweden, workers on zero-hour contracts cannot get sick pay and until recently, sick pay was not paid at all to anyone on the first day of absence.

However, in all countries trade unions of elderly care workers have been able to make a decisive difference, both for elderly care workers and for the elderly. In the UK, for instance, trade unions such as UNISON were instrumental in exposing shortages of PPE by repeatedly carrying out surveys among care workers. In Denmark, FOA fought hard to make sure there were proper inspections of health and safety conditions – including access to PPE and PPE guidelines – at the workplaces. In Portugal, trade unions managed to force both employers and public authorities to increase the supply of PPE, even if the supply remained far from adequate.

Throughout the pandemic, trade unions have been decisive in making sure care workers have adequate PPE, the right to sick pay, and access to testing.

In Sweden, the trade union Kommunal had the employer association SKR urge all municipal employers to extend temporary contracts to at least 14 days of duration, so that also employees on short-term contracts would be able to benefit from payments when sick. And in Germany, Ver.di has successfully campaigned for the European Union to support and coordinate national healthcare systems to ensure equal access to quality healthcare and elderly care for all Europeans, not least by establishing minimum standards.

The EU can do more for care workers

In the EU, there are around 6.3 million elderly care workers, of which four in five are female and two in five work part time. But even though the workforce has grown by one-third over the past decade, staff shortage is expected to increase. With an aging European population, the understaffed and underfinanced elderly care sector is being challenged facing a substantial expansion in the coming years. In Spain, for instance, it is estimated that the workforce has to increase by 200 per cent until 2050.

In the context of the European Health Union, the EU is now investing 9.4 billion euros to build a resilient health system during the coming six years. Even though the investment is a positive first step, it does not guarantee better working conditions and living standards for employees or residents. Sectoral collective bargaining will be instrumental to ensure decent working conditions and standards of care where unions, employers and governments can support each other.

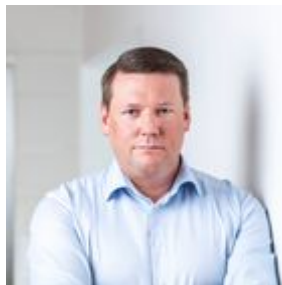
Throughout the pandemic, trade unions have been decisive in making sure care workers have adequate PPE, the right to sick pay, and access to testing. Beyond dealing with the emergency, and fighting for the urgent needs of their members, trade unions have also campaigned for thorough reform of elderly care: for a sector that can offer its workers decent working conditions, adequate pay, and respect.

At the European Social Summit, let's make sure we listen to their demands.



Lisa Pelling
Uppsala

Dr Lisa Pelling is a political scientist and head of the Stockholm-based think tank Arena Idé. She regularly contributes to the daily digital newspaper Dagens Arena and has a background as a political adviser and speechwriter at the Swedish foreign ministry.



Tobias Baudin
Stockholm

Tobias Baudin is the chairperson of Kommunal, the Swedish Municipal Workers' Trade Union, since 2016. With over 500,000 members, Kommunal is one of Sweden's largest trade unions. Tobias Baudin has also been the deputy chairperson of the Swedish blue-collar trade union confederation LO (2012–2016).



Philipp Fink
Stockholm

Dr Philipp Fink heads the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's office in Sweden.

Previously, he worked as a desk officer in the Economic and Social Policy Department in Berlin.