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Too hot to work

Rising temperatures directly threaten workers' health and safety. Europe must adopt proactive and coordinated measures to safeguard its workforce

While the characters in *Game of Thrones* dreaded winter, in reality, the phrase 'summer is coming' now serves as a stark warning of occupational hazards. This growing concern is amplified by the undeniable impact of climate change.

On 4 March, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) adopted a resolution outlining the content of a future directive aimed at preventing occupational heat risk. This is not the first time the ETUC has sought greater protection in this area. Heat poses significant social and environmental consequences, evident in recent events such as the wildfires in California last February, last summer's heatwaves across Europe and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) projections of continuously rising and intensifying temperatures in the coming decades.

The world of work is far from immune to these risks. Climate change, and the associated rise in temperatures, directly threatens workers' health and safety. The International Labour Organization, in its latest report 'Ensuring Safety and Health at Work in a Changing Climate', has already issued a warning on this critical issue. The report indicates that 2.41 billion workers worldwide are exposed to excessive heat, with the European figure reaching 130 million. Crucially, foresight studies suggest these risks will continue to escalate.

Why the delay in action?

It is only a matter of time before news reports detail rising temperatures and their debilitating effects on workers. This begs an important question: why wait to act? Discussions surrounding excessive heat in the workplace often narrow the focus to fatalities. However, this creates a 'tunnel vision' effect, addressing only the visible tip of a much larger iceberg. The real problem is far more extensive, encompassing

a diverse range of short-term and long-term consequences. A clear example is the wide spectrum of health effects linked to excessive heat, including 'heat stress, heatstroke, heat exhaustion, rhabdomyolysis, heat syncope, heat cramps, heat rash, cardiovascular disease, acute kidney injury, chronic kidney disease and physical injury'. More recently, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work has identified eco-anxiety as an emerging occupational safety and health risk directly tied to rising temperatures.

Furthermore, while excessive heat primarily affects outdoor workers, other sectors are by no means unaffected. The same applies to individual worker characteristics, such as age, gender or pre-existing health conditions, which can heighten vulnerability. Therefore, regulation must address both the common and differentiated needs that excessive heat creates. For instance, consider a worker performing duties outdoors where temperatures exceed 40°C. Now, imagine that same worker in an industrial laundry facility, where industrial irons reaching 150°C significantly elevate the working environment temperature. Finally, consider that worker to be 55 years of age and in the premenopausal stage.

The conclusion is self-evident: as workers face varying levels of vulnerability, the protective measures in place should accommodate these differences.

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The proposed Directive outlines adaptation tools aimed at reducing workers' vulnerability to the risks posed by extreme heat, adopting a comprehensive perspective. Key aspects of the resolution include calls for establishing maximum working temperatures, while factoring in sectoral and personal conditions. It also advocates for mandatory heat risk assessments, which would necessitate a clear definition of heat stress. Additionally, it would be crucial to adopt more suitable risk assessment methods, such as Wet Bulb Globe Temperature, ensuring they are inclusive, given that the risk disproportionately affects vulnerable groups. Another proposed tool is the implementation of heat management plans, which would regulate responses to adverse weather conditions. Some countries, such as Spain, already have regulations requiring companies to communicate alerts issued by

meteorological authorities.

Moreover, workers should be afforded specific rights, including health monitoring related to their individual vulnerability to extreme heat, and the right to receive training on this issue. They should also have the right to suspend work in the event of imminent risk and even to receive social protection during work stoppages.

It is worth noting that the resolution aligns with the logic of the Framework Directive on occupational health and safety by advocating the STOP approach, which prioritises: (1) Substituting or eliminating the risk where possible; (2) implementing Technical measures (e.g., cooling areas); (3) adopting Organisational measures (e.g., concentrating work during cooler hours); and (4) providing Personal protective equipment.

Ultimately, the ETUC's proposal is both necessary and appropriate. It seeks to adapt work to a specific and growing risk that increasingly affects workers, consistent with the EU legal framework for occupational health and safety, where emerging and unaddressed risks demand targeted regulatory action.

Examples to follow, gaps to be filled

This proactive perspective has been adopted by some countries, such as Spain, which is committed to establishing a comprehensive regulation on the protection of workers against climate change-related risks. While this regulation is not yet in place, the government has pledged to approve it within the current year. Greece has also temporarily approved the suspension of outdoor work during periods of extreme temperatures. However, both measures were implemented as direct responses to specific climate change-related events.

Currently, regulations and measures on this topic are not harmonised across Europe. This places additional pressure on the European Commission, as some Member States will begin to acknowledge the risk and take action, while others will remain without specific protections. This lack of harmonised protection could be effectively addressed with such a Directive. Furthermore, it is important to recognise that other extreme weather events, such as droughts, floods and heatwaves, also have occupational health and safety components that must be addressed in the near future.

Looking ahead, this problem will only continue to grow.
The Mediterranean region, in particular, is expected to experience

significant temperature increases. This means that, over time, the consequences for workers' health and safety will become more severe, making efforts to address them increasingly complex. Both the EU and its Member States must adopt proactive and coordinated action instead of merely reactive approaches.

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