

Press release

8 April 2020

Joint statement EuroCommerce/UNI-Europa

The EU Social Partners in the retail and wholesale sector are working together to ensure the continued safety of its workforce who are interacting daily with European consumers, while working to avoid the present COVID-19 pandemic putting at risk the 29 million jobs in the sector in Europe

The food supply chain is vital to the health and wellbeing of Europe's citizens, and we wish to pay tribute to all employees in the sector, working hard and often long hours, to make sure that Europe's consumers have what they need to live a normal life in extraordinary circumstances. Retail and wholesale staff have faced difficult working conditions and carried on providing a fundamental social service.

They also wish underline the difficulties and uncertainty facing workers unable to work in companies the non-food sector which have been forced to shut down due to the measures aimed at combating the virus, and which face the risk of imminent bankruptcy.

Employers and unions are working together on necessary safety measures, maintaining physical distance among customers and staff, providing hand sanitiser and safety infrastructure in their shops, ensuring staff are allowed time for frequent handwashing and appropriate periods of rest, and are being trained in hygiene techniques to protect themselves.

The social partners also call on retailers to provide staff with guidance and protection in cases of violence and verbal abuse against them from customers panic-buying, or upset at out-of-stock items and waiting to enter or leave stores. EuroCommerce and UNI-Europa have reminded all social partners of the guidance they have published on how to deal with such incidents.

As European social partners, they ask EU and national authorities to:

- Secure the jobs of many millions of Europeans employed by retail and wholesale companies, 99% of which are SMEs, who have been forced to close due to the virus. This should include help to companies to continue to pay their staff and provide bridging finance to avoid a massive wave of bankruptcies, particularly among non-food operators.
- Governments to look at measures to alleviate the situation of retail workers subject to temporary unemployment due to store closures;
- At the same time consider, as soon as stay-at-home restrictions start to be lifted, to priorities allowing non-food shops gradually to reopen, subject to the same preventative health measures as in food shops, e.g. maintaining distance between customers and between customers and staff, limiting the number of customers in a shop at any time and adequate protective measures for staff.
- Supporting companies in training workers while their shops are shut to improve their digital skills and future employability; to this end, the Commission should look to streamline processes to release EU funds urgently now from initiatives such as ESF+ , and governments to support the EU's SURE initiative and where they have none, urgently set up short-time working schemes.

Press release

8 April 2020

- Class employees in food retail and wholesale as essential workers, who should be given help if schools and childcare facilities have closed; in frontier regions, national authorities must let them cross the border freely to get to work.
- Provide adequate state financial support for workers forced to stop work due to the virus or there is a suspicion that they or one of their family are infected, and for those who need to take time off to look after someone affected. The social partners stress the need for all parties to work together to support vulnerable employees, including those with pre-existing conditions, the disabled and pregnant women.
- Allow lorries carrying food and other essential supplies to cross EU internal borders through fast lanes, and avoid the significant delays which have occurred at many frontiers. Guarantee their safety by allowing lorry drivers to avoid unnecessary contact and the risk of illness at borders, and guarantee that drivers are not prevented from returning to their home member state after delivering goods.
- Engage with social partners in drawing up an exit strategy and support measures to avoid significant permanent closures of shops and the social impact these risk to local employment and the viability of rural communities and town centres, and to help return the sector to normality after the virus has subsided.
- Include in such measures training and retraining of employees to work with the latest digital technology and provide help to SME retailers to rebuild and safeguard the future of their businesses, including support to supplement their physical shops with an online presence.

Social Dialogue at all levels can provide a powerful framework for finding suitable solutions under these exceptional circumstances, and experience shows that it can contribute to achieving the high-level buy-in needed.

Europe must act effectively and in solidarity in facing this emergency by protecting all its affected citizens, workers and businesses. The European social partners in the retail and wholesale sector remain committed to protecting employees and their jobs, suppliers and customers, and maintaining this essential economic activity during this crisis.

-ENDS-

Contact:

Neil McMillan - +32 2 737 05 99 - mcmillan@eurocommerce.eu

Theo Morrissey - +32 499 14 56 95 - theo.morrissey@uniglobalunion.org

[EuroCommerce](#) is the principal European organisation representing the retail and wholesale sector. It embraces national associations in 31 countries and 5.4 million companies, both leading global players such as Carrefour, Ikea, Metro and Tesco, and many small businesses. Retail and wholesale provide a link between producers and 500 million European consumers over a billion times a day. It generates 1 in 7 jobs, providing a varied career for 29 million Europeans, many of them young people. It also supports millions of further jobs throughout the supply chain, from small local suppliers to international businesses. EuroCommerce is the recognised European social partner for the retail and wholesale sector.

[UNI Europa](#) is the European Trade Union Federation for 7 million service sector workers. It speaks for the sectors that constitute the backbone of economic and social life in Europe. Headquartered in Brussels, UNI Europa represents 272 national trade unions in 50 countries.

