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**NOTE**

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From: General Secretariat of the Council  
To: Delegations  
Subject: Draft Council Conclusions on sustainable work over the life course

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Delegations will find attached a set of draft Council Conclusions prepared by the Presidency with a view to the meeting of the Social Questions Working Party on 20 October 2021.

## Draft Council conclusions on sustainable work over the life course

### ACKNOWLEDGING that:

1. The world of work is rapidly changing as a result of technological progress, globalisation, climate change, and population ageing. The EU's working-age population has been shrinking for a decade and this trend is expected to continue.<sup>1</sup> With the overall population remaining relatively constant, the risk of labour shortages is increasing. To compensate for the shrinking working-age population, it is necessary to bring more people into the labour market, offering quality jobs, enable longer working lives and improve productivity<sup>2</sup>.
2. To constantly improve people's living and working conditions is the essential objective of the European Union<sup>3</sup>. The European Pillar of Social Rights<sup>4</sup> (hereinafter: the Pillar) is the compass to guide us in achieving this aim. The European Council's Strategic Agenda identifies the implementation of the Pillar as a priority action for 2019–2024. In the Porto Declaration, EU leaders stated that European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan<sup>5</sup> provides useful guidance for the implementation of the Pillar and welcomed the three new EU 2030 headline targets on employment, skills, and poverty reduction.
3. The Union and Member States have committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda<sup>6</sup>, including Goal 8, which focuses on sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. As also recognised in the ILO Centenary Declaration, the changing world of work requires urgent action to seize the opportunities and address the challenges for a fair, inclusive, and secure future of work for all<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See also Green paper on ageing. Fostering solidarity and responsibility between generations. COM(2021) 50 final

<sup>2</sup> See also European Commission Report on the Impact of Demographic Change. 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union, Preamble

<sup>4</sup> Inter-institutional Proclamation on the European Pillar of Social Rights. OJ 2017/C 428/09

<sup>5</sup> Action Plan presented by the Commission on 4 March 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. A/RES/70/1

<sup>7</sup> ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work

4. Parties to the European Social Charter have accepted certain rights and principles as objectives of their policies: all workers should have the right to just conditions of work, the right to safe and healthy working conditions, and the right to bargain collectively. Additionally, all persons with family responsibilities and who are engaged in or wish to engage in employment have a right to do so without being subject to discrimination, and as far as possible without conflict between their employment and family responsibilities<sup>8</sup>.
5. In its Council Conclusions of 2020<sup>9</sup>, on ‘Demographic Challenges – the Way Ahead’ the Council recognised the significant impact of the demographic transition on our economies and social protection systems. The Council called upon Member States to address the challenges, while tapping into the opportunities for economic and social development. The Council also acknowledged the mutually reinforcing nature of people’s well-being and economic growth in its 2019<sup>10</sup> Council Conclusions on the Economy of Well-being.
6. Recent initiatives by the Commission can contribute to improving quality and sustainability of work. The EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2021-2027<sup>11</sup> sets out the key priorities and actions the Commission considers necessary for improving workers’ health and safety in the coming years, which will be marked by the green, digital, and demographic transitions. The European Skills Agenda intends to deliver on the Pillar as concerns its first principle on the right to quality and inclusive education, training, and lifelong learning.

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<sup>8</sup> European Social Charter (revised), which has been ratified by AT, BE, BG, CY, EE, FI, FR, DE, EL, HU, IE, IT, LV, LT, MT, NL, PT, RO, SK, SI, ES and SE.

<sup>9</sup> Council conclusions on ‘Demographic Challenges – the Way Ahead’. OJ 2020/C 205/03

<sup>10</sup> Council conclusions on the Economy of Wellbeing. OJ 2019/C 400/09

<sup>11</sup> EU Strategic Framework on Occupational Safety and Health and Safety at Work 2021-2027. COM(2021)323 final

7. The term ‘sustainable work over the life course’ used in these conclusions means living and working conditions that allow people to engage and remain in work throughout an extended working life. This includes the transformation of work to eliminate the factors that discourage or hinder workers from staying in or entering the workforce, while taking individual circumstances into account. Availability for work differs and is likely to change over the life course. The challenge is to match the needs and abilities of the individual and the quality of jobs on offer.<sup>12</sup>
8. Sustainable work can be achieved by investing in quality jobs and human capital, with a particular focus on occupational safety and health, up-skilling and re-skilling, fair working conditions, and reconciliation of people’s professional and private lives. Sustainable work is an essential component of the economy of wellbeing<sup>13</sup> and an important driver of increased labour force participation, productivity, economic performance<sup>14</sup> and social inclusion. If work is unsustainable, it affects the health and wellbeing of people in the labour market and their dependants, with consequences that emerge immediately or in the medium to long term<sup>15</sup>.
9. In its opinion on sustainable quality work<sup>16</sup>, the European Economic and Social Committee
  - a) recognises the sustainable quality work as one of the essential components of quality of life, which must be considered together with the concept of sustainable development;
  - b) considers ensuring sustainable quality work as the shared responsibility of the Commission, the Member States and European and national social partners;
  - c) stresses that social dialogue should be strengthened and broadened to cover more strategic topics focused on sustainability.

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<sup>12</sup> Eurofound, 2015. Sustainable work over the life course: Concept paper.

<sup>13</sup> Council conclusions on the Economy of Wellbeing. OJ 2019/C 400/09

<sup>14</sup> OECD, 2018. Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers No. 221 Job Quality, Health and Productivity: An evidence-based framework for analysis.

<sup>15</sup> Eurofound, 2015. Sustainable work over the life course: Concept paper. and Eurofound, 2021. Working conditions and sustainable work: An analysis using the job quality framework.

<sup>16</sup> European Economic and Social Committee, 2021. Key components of sustainable quality work during and after recovery. [Exploratory opinion at the request of the Slovenian Presidency]. SOC/685.

## CONSIDERING that:

10. The shrinking working-age population and increasing longevity present challenges for the functioning of the labour market and require adaptations to social protection systems. Long-term demographic projections for the EU reveal that the population is expected to decline and to experience a significant change in its age structure<sup>17</sup>. Labour productivity growth is projected to become the sole source of potential output growth in the EU and the total cost of ageing is set to increase in the long term in the EU<sup>18</sup>.
11. Sustainable work is fundamental for enabling individuals to stay healthy and active as they age, for the prolongation of their working lives, for adequate and sustainable social protection systems, and therefore for the functioning of the economy as a whole. While more research on sustainable work is still needed, the available analyses clearly show that investments in health and safety at work, fair working conditions, education and training, and opportunities to reconcile private and professional responsibilities pay off by improving people's wellbeing and thus enhances their participation in work over their lifespan.

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<sup>17</sup> The working-age population (20-64 years of age) will decrease by 32.1 million potential workers (18.6 million men, 13.5 million women) by 2070, meaning the EU would then have less than two working-age persons for every person aged 65 or older, instead of about three working-age people in 2019. In: European Commission, 2021. The 2021 Ageing Report. Economic & Budgetary Projections for the EU Member States (2019-2070). Institutional paper 148.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

12. The quality of jobs in the Union has been slowly improving in recent decades. While in 2015, 86 % of employees in the EU were satisfied or very satisfied with their working conditions, a little less than a quarter estimated that their work endangered their health or safety, and a quarter believed that their work mostly had a negative impact on their health, with men more likely to report these negative influences. Adequate skills are an important factor driving work satisfaction and productivity, and some 28 % of employees report having the skills to cope with more demanding duties (men 30 %, women 27 %), whereas 14 %<sup>19</sup> need further training to cope well with their duties.<sup>20</sup> Working hours do not fit very well with family or social commitments outside work for nearly every fifth worker (20 % of men, 16 % of women) and every fifth worker has felt too tired after work to do some necessary household jobs.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Figures are only gender disaggregated where there is a tangible difference between men and women.

<sup>20</sup> Eurofound, 2021. Working conditions and sustainable work: An Analysis using the job quality framework.

<sup>21</sup> Eurofound, 2017. Sixth European Working Conditions Survey – Overview report, figures for EU-28.

13. Occupational health and safety is a prerequisite for work to be sustainable. The accumulation of negative (health) consequences of work during an individual's working life negatively affects the quality of their ageing and can curtail their working life. The green, digital and demographic transitions require us to anticipate and manage change. A 'prevention through design' approach integrated with a worker-centred design approach can help to mitigate new and emerging occupational safety and health challenges related to digitalisation<sup>22</sup> (such as 24/7 digital availability, blurred private-working life boundaries and use of devices that determine pace of work or monitor workers' performance<sup>23</sup>), psychosocial and ergonomic risks and an ageing workforce. Moreover, projections show that investing in occupational safety and health pays off: the return is almost two euro for every euro invested<sup>24</sup>; while work-related injuries and diseases cost society the equivalent of more than 3.3 % of EU GDP<sup>25</sup>.
14. Providing opportunities for skilling, up-skilling and re-skilling throughout working life is an important component of sustainable work. It helps adults adapting to changing labour markets, preventing unemployment, and contributes to not leaving anyone behind. The vast majority of establishments in the EU provide some form of training (including on-the-job training), however about three out of ten provide it to less than 20 % of their employees<sup>26</sup>. Training paid for or provided by employers is more accessible to employees with permanent contracts (44 %) than those with fixed-term contracts (31 %) or those with other or no contracts (only 22 %)<sup>27</sup>. In 2016, only 37 % of adults were participating in learning activities each year. For low-qualified adults the rate was only 18 %.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The 'prevention through design' approach is a way to prevent and control occupational injuries, illnesses, and fatalities early in the planning and design process. See also EU-OSHA, 2018. Foresight on new and emerging occupational safety and health risks associated with digitalisation by 2025.

<sup>23</sup> See also EU-OSHA, 2019. European Survey of Enterprises on New and Emerging Risks, ESENER. and Eurofound, 2017. Sixth European Working Conditions Survey – Overview report.

<sup>24</sup> European Commission, 2011. Socio-economic costs of accidents at work and work-related ill health. Key messages and case studies.

<sup>25</sup> EU-OSHA, 2017. An international comparison of the cost of work-related accidents and illnesses.

<sup>26</sup> Eurofound and Cedefop, 2020. European Company Survey 2019: Workplace practices unlocking employee potential.

<sup>27</sup> Eurofound, 2017. Sixth European Working Conditions Survey – Overview report.

<sup>28</sup> European Commission, 2021. European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan. COM(2021) 102 final

15. Flexibility, security and predictability are important aspects of sustainable work. The share of non-standard forms of work has been increasing in the last decade. More than four out of ten workers in the EU are not in a standard employment relationship<sup>29</sup>. Non-standard forms of work can create new job opportunities (in particular due to enhanced flexibility), notably for those further away from the labour market, but can also increase insecurity and uncertainty, which negatively affect people's wellbeing. There is limited comparable data on non-standard forms of work, their significance for labour markets and their impact on social protection systems across the EU. Flexible working arrangements either in standard or non-standard employment should enable better reconciliation of people's private and professional lives. However, further efforts are needed to improve working conditions and social protection of those in non-standard employment to make work sustainable for everybody.
16. The gender employment gap is a major unsustainable feature of labour markets. The loss of the educational and work potential of women has a negative effect on the performance and competitive edge of the EU economy. This amounted to a cost for the EU of more than EUR 320 billion in 2018, which corresponds to 2.4 % of EU GDP that year<sup>30</sup>. A crucial explanatory factor for women's lower participation in the labour market is their greater burden of care responsibilities, resulting from unequal sharing between them and their male counterparts<sup>31</sup>. The lifetime cost of a woman's exclusion from employment is estimated at between EUR 1.2 million and EUR 2 million depending on her educational level, with the cost generally being estimated as higher for women with higher educational attainment<sup>32</sup>. Improving the accessibility, affordability and quality of care services could contribute to closing the gender employment gap.

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<sup>29</sup> European Parliament, 2016. Precarious Employment in Europe. Patterns, Trends and Policy Strategies.

<sup>30</sup> Eurofound, 2020. Women and labour market equality: Has COVID-19 rolled back recent gains?

<sup>31</sup> Eurofound, 2018. Striking a balance: Reconciling work and life in the EU.

<sup>32</sup> European Commission, 2017. Impact assessment accompanying the document Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on work-life balance for parents and carers and repealing Council Directive 2010/18/EU.

17. Social dialogue is key to ensuring sustainable work to the benefit of all parties. Social partners are particularly well placed for identifying - in the circumstances of specific activities or sectors - the health and safety solutions and conditions enabling sustainable work. Social dialogue is thus also crucial for well-functioning and productive economies and cohesive societies.

## **THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION INVITES**

### **THE MEMBER STATES, taking into account national circumstances, to:**

18. STRENGTHEN policies to improve working conditions for all and to support people through the transitions they face throughout their working lives so that they are able to enter and re-enter the labour market quickly and find a quality job.
19. UPDATE their national legal frameworks and current occupational and health strategies with due consideration for the EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2021-2027, focusing on its three crosscutting key objectives of anticipating and managing change in the new world of work, improving prevention of workplace accidents and illnesses, and increasing preparedness for any potential health crisis.
20. ENSURE that sufficient resources are available for the functioning, networking and promotion of the EU-OSHA national Focal Points.
21. IMPROVE mechanisms for addressing skills mismatches and UPDATE the methods to forecast skills demand.
22. Continuously DEVELOP and ADAPT the opportunities for lifelong learning to help people to adapt to the changing world of work, also by taking into account the European Skills Agenda.
23. STRENGTHEN the effectiveness of labour inspections and other enforcement and supervisory mechanisms, as appropriate, so that the applicable legal provisions relevant to sustainable work are observed.
24. FURTHER EXPLORE possibilities for better reconciliation of professional and private lives, including by improving the accessibility, affordability, and quality of care services.

**THE MEMBER STATES AND THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION, in accordance with their respective competences, to:**

25. ANALYSE the main obstacles to sustainable work and systematically strive to IDENTIFY solutions enabling it, thus supporting active ageing and the longer working lives, people's wellbeing, labour force participation, social protection systems, productivity, and economic performance.
26. SUPPORT research and development of quality databases on sustainable work to ensure data consistency, comparability and accessibility for evidence-based policymaking.
27. STRENGTHEN mainstreaming of occupational safety and health into relevant policies and measures, especially in the area of public health (in particular mental health), social care, education and training, digitalisation, artificial intelligence, public procurement, and the environment.
28. FURTHER DEVELOP comparable statistical data on non-standard forms of work and ANALYSE their significance for labour market transformations and their impact on social protection systems.
29. FACILITATE and SUPPORT the exchange of best practices and acquired knowledge on sustainable work and its long-term benefits for the functioning of labour markets and social protection systems as well as for the people's wellbeing, while taking into account the underlying trends accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.
30. PROMOTE a culture of prevention in the field of occupational safety and health and a culture of lifelong learning.
31. DESIGN and IMPLEMENT targeted measures to tackle the gender employment gap.
32. SUPPORT the social partners in order to enhance their capacity to promote sustainable work.

**THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION to:**

33. ANALYSE the consequences of unsustainable work practices and the benefits of sustainable work for individuals, employers and society as a whole, in close cooperation with the relevant EU agencies.
34. KEEP the relevant Union acts under review, with a view to improving the contribution of existing measures to sustainable work and put forward the necessary proposals to ADAPT the existing legal instruments to the demands of the changing world of work, in particular with regard to population ageing.
35. RECOGNISE the importance of sustainable work over the course of people's lives while drafting the European Care Strategy, which has been announced recently.

**THE SOCIAL PARTNERS, while respecting their role and autonomy, to:**

36. CONTINUE TO ENGAGE in social dialogue at all levels about the changing world of work.
37. PROMOTE awareness raising on the benefits of sustainable work for workers, employers, citizens, and society as a whole and on a culture of occupational safety and health and a culture of lifelong learning.
38. PROMOTE preventive action as the most effective way of ensuring sustainable work, in particular with regard to the impact of population ageing.
39. RAISE AWARENESS that a higher level of occupational health and safety is beneficial to workers, employers, citizens and society as a whole, and that safe and health-friendly jobs contribute to the sustainability and competitiveness of the Union's economy.
40. ENSURE effective implementation of the existing occupational safety and health rules.