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INTERNATIONAL WORKERS' DAY

Protecting Third-Country National Workers from Exploitation in Europe

La Strada International, FairWork, Fundación Amaranta, Animus Association, APF & La Strada Poland - Trafficked en Route

On the occasion of the **International Workers' Day**, we reaffirm the **fundamental rights of all workers** and draw **urgent attention to the situation of third-country national (TCN) workers** across Europe. This day is a reminder that decent work, fair conditions, and dignity in labour must apply to everyone, regardless of origin or migration status.

Across Europe, **many TCN workers face widespread labour exploitation, often rooted in unfair and opaque recruitment practices.** Entering EU labour markets through complex chains of intermediaries, workers may be misled about job conditions, charged illegal recruitment fees, and placed in situations of dependency and debt. These practices can escalate into severe forms of exploitation, including forced labour and human trafficking.

Misconduct by recruitment and employment agencies remains a key driver of this exploitation. Agencies and intermediaries may engage in deceptive practices, abuse cross-border recruitment systems, and operate with limited oversight or accountability.

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Hence, there is an urgent need for stronger regulation, licensing, and monitoring of these actors across the EU. Where serious misconduct occurs, it must be effectively sanctioned. In line with the revised (2024) EU Anti-Trafficking Directive (art. 6), sanctions against responsible legal entities should be effective, proportionate, and dissuasive, and may include fines, exclusion from public benefits, bans on commercial activities, judicial supervision, or closure of establishments.

Too often, exploitation remains under-recognised or falls into legal grey zones, where cases are treated as minor labour or migration violations rather than serious crimes. As a result, workers are left without adequate protection, while accountability across recruitment and subcontracting chains remains weak or unclear.

Labour exploitation exists on a continuum - from decent work to severe coercion - and is enabled by gaps in regulation, weak enforcement, and restrictive migration pathways. Addressing these systemic issues requires coordinated action at both EU and national levels.

We call on the European Union and its Member States to:

- **Strengthen regulation and oversight of recruitment and employment intermediaries**, including across borders
- Ensure **transparency and clear accountability** throughout labour supply chains
- Enforce the **prohibition of worker-paid recruitment fees** and sanction abusive practices
- Close legislative gaps and improve the implementation of existing protections
- Guarantee access to **safe reporting mechanisms, justice, and support services** for all workers, regardless of migration status

Fair and transparent recruitment, combined with strong labour rights enforcement, is essential to preventing exploitation and supporting sustainable labour mobility in Europe. Protecting third-country nationals workers is not only a matter of rights, it is fundamental to fair labour markets and the rule of law.

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