

World Day for Decent Work - Statement 7 October 2026

Equal Rights and Decent Work for All Workers

On World Day for Decent Work, we reaffirm a fundamental principle: **decent work should be a reality for all workers across Europe, including migrant workers from outside the EU.**

Europe's economy heavily relies on migrant workers, increasingly third-country nationals, who contribute across all sectors and occupations with different skill and salary levels. They form a significant part of the workforce across sectors ranging from agriculture, construction and logistics to hospitality, care and transport, including through platform work. Labour mobility is a key driver of Europe's productivity, competitiveness and growth, and the EU has placed decent work, fair pay and strong working conditions at the heart of its commitment to social fairness. Yet third-country workers, particularly those in low-paid and precarious jobs, are disproportionately exposed to severe forms of exploitation and abuse. While Europe benefits from migrant workers' contribution to its economy, it fails to ensure decent work, fair pay and safe working conditions for all.

The ways in which labour migration pathways are designed play an important role in facilitating labour mobility, connecting workers with employment opportunities and helping employers address labour shortages. There are often different intermediaries involved, such as private recruitment agencies. The majority of non-EU migrant workers arrive through regular pathways but are still more likely than other workers to experience abuse and exploitation.

Hence these pathways must be properly regulated, accessible in practice, and monitored to ensure that recruitment and employment practices respect workers' rights and do not create opportunities for exploitation, as too often happens in practice. Whether these workers have access to decent work appears to be of little concern to those who profit most from their recruitment and exploit their vulnerability.

When workers depend on employers and intermediaries for employment and residence permits, that dependency can become a powerful means of control, severely limiting their ability to assert their rights or leave exploitative situations. These migrant workers are often misled about wages, working or living conditions, charged excessive recruitment fees, or subjected to unlawful deductions and additional payments. Such practices can give rise to a range of exploitative conditions, including excessive working hours, unsafe working environments, little or no pay, confiscation of identity documents, and debt bondage. In their most severe forms, these practices can amount to forced labour and trafficking in human beings.

Exploitation is enabled by structural vulnerability

Administrative barriers, economic hardship and restricted opportunities, exacerbated by limited knowledge of labour rights and language barriers, increase migrant workers' vulnerability. Reporting abuse or exploitation may mean risking their job, income, accommodation and right to remain in the country, especially when residence permits are tied to a specific employer and procedures to change employer are too uncertain and time-limited, which is often the case. Those in irregular work or without papers face even greater barriers, particularly where fear of detention or deportation prevents them from seeking help. Safe reporting mechanisms and effective firewalls between labour enforce-

ment and immigration authorities are therefore essential, yet largely absent from legislation, policies and practice across Europe. The same goes for other safeguards. Fast, free, flexible and predictable procedures to change employer when permits are linked to employment are also crucial.

Gaps in legislation and practice to protect third-country migrant workers' rights

Today, we launch the report [Legislation and Practice Gaps: Addressing severe forms of labour exploitation of third-country nationals along migration routes to Europe](#), published within the framework of the two-year EU-funded project [Trafficked En Route - Early Identification and Support to Victims of Human Trafficking for Labour Exploitation](#).

In this report we examine the pathways and conditions for employment of third-country workers in Bulgaria, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, and Spain, revealing how migrants' insecure status, dependence on employers or recruitment agencies, and limited knowledge of their rights increase their vulnerability. Exploitation, including wage theft, excessive working hours, unsafe conditions, fraudulent recruitment, debt bondage and other malpractices, is significantly under-reported and under-identified, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, construction, logistics, hospitality, care work, and platform work. These are sectors characterised by high demand for flexible or low-cost labour, workers' relatively weak bargaining power and, in some cases, limited oversight.

European and national laws provide protections against labour rights violations and more severe forms of labour exploitation, including human trafficking and establish obligations to prevent exploitation, identify and protect victims, prosecute perpetrators and provide access to justice. However, there is a major gap between rights on paper and their practical implementation. Labour exploitation can be difficult to identify when it occurs through temporary employment, informal work, subcontracting or complex cross-border recruitment arrangements. Labour inspectors, police, prosecutors and judges do not always recognise indicators of serious exploitation, including forced labour and human trafficking. As a result, cases involving serious exploitation may be treated as minor labour or administrative violations. Workers may not be identified as victims, and hence be denied specialised protection, assistance and remedies, including access to back wages and compensation. At the same time, perpetrators, including legitimate businesses, reap large profits and avoid accountability, allowing exploitative practices to continue.

Recruitment must be fair, transparent and accountable

Recruitment and temporary employment agencies must therefore be effectively regulated, licensed, monitored and held accountable in cases of misconduct, including by ensuring sufficient resources for verification and monitoring, as well as effective complaints and redress mechanisms for workers. Recruitment and temporary employment agencies should have a clear and continuing responsibility for the workers they recruit and place, including ensuring access to decent work, fair pay, safe working conditions, appropriate health and social protection, and adequate insurance. Their responsibility should not end once a worker is placed with an employer. Responsibility must also extend across labour supply chains. Employers and businesses must not be able to evade responsibility through layers of subcontractors, labour intermediaries or cross-border arrangements. Workers' rights must not disappear somewhere between the recruiter, the agency, the subcontractor and the final employer.

Rights must not depend on migration status. Labour rights and migration rights are inseparable.

Labour mobility must put the rights and dignity of workers at its centre, rather than increasing their vulnerability. A rights-based response must ensure that workers experiencing exploitation can report and access protection and support regardless of migration status. This includes emergency accommodation, healthcare, legal assistance, interpretation and psychosocial support. Workers who leave exploitative employment must also have realistic pathways to secure residence and protection.

On **World Day for Decent Work**, we urge European institutions and Member States to ensure that every worker can exercise their rights. If decent work is a fundamental European principle, it must apply to all workers, regardless of their nationality or migration status. A decent work system is not measured by how well it protects those who already have the most security, but rather by how effectively it protects the most vulnerable.

We call on the European Union and Member States to act and to ensure decent work for all by:

- ◆ Strengthening regulation and oversight of recruitment and employment intermediaries through effective licensing, accountability, monitoring and enforcement, while prohibiting abuses such as worker-paid recruitment fees.
- ◆ Eliminating legal loopholes that leave TCN workers vulnerable in temporary agency work, posting arrangements, subcontracting and platform work.
- ◆ Ensuring transparency and accountability, strengthening liability throughout labour supply chains, including subcontracting and cross-border employment arrangements.
- ◆ Establishing safe reporting mechanisms and firewalls between labour enforcement and immigration authorities, enabling workers to report exploitation and access remedies without risk of detention or deportation.
- ◆ Strengthening labour inspection and enforcement, with specialised training for labour inspectors, police, prosecutors and judges to detect severe forms of labour exploitation.
- ◆ Encouraging consulates to carefully verify employment contracts, employers, and recruiters to prevent fraudulent and abusive recruitment practices.
- ◆ Guarantying access to protection, support and remedies, regardless of migration status, including information, interpretation, accommodation, healthcare, psychosocial support, legal assistance and compensation.
- ◆ Providing secure residence pathways for exploited workers, ensuring that workers are not forced to remain with abusive employers because of their migration status.
- ◆ Improving access to justice through legal assistance, recovery of unpaid wages and other damages, and protection against premature return before legal claims can be pursued.