

FIRE FIGHTERS WORKING CONDITIONS: CHALLENGES AND DEMANDS

CESI POSITION

The European Confederation of Independent Trade Unions (CESI) is a confederation of more than 40 national and European trade union organisations from over 20 European countries, with a total of more than 5 million individual members. Founded in 1990, CESI advocates improved employment conditions for workers in Europe and a strong social dimension in the EU. CESI represents public and private sector workers and is a recognised European sectoral social partner. CESI also represents firefighting sector trade unions from across Europe.

Firefighters play a key role in protecting lives, the environment, nature, buildings, and infrastructure. In natural and human-induced catastrophes, crises and disasters, they are those in the frontline to re-establish, maintain and ensure the security of the people – often at risk of their own life.

Despite their vital role in society, firefighters often lack a proper recognition that reflects the value of the work that they carry out. During operations firefighters are often victims of third-party violence. Working conditions are difficult and entail many sacrifices. Long working hours, life-threatening situations, and dysfunctional equipment or deployment procedures impact negatively on the physical and mental health of firefighters.

It is therefore of utmost importance to valorise the firefighters' profession. This must include measures to fully recognise the risks and courage it entails, and to provide firefighters with the support needed to carry out their jobs safely and effectively – to their and the citizens' benefit.

CESI key demands for improving the working conditions of fire fighters:

1. Fire fighters must benefit from very high societal recognition. They risk their lives saving others.
The EU's institutions and European social partner and trade unions organisations should undertake the measures to step up cooperation in awareness-raising activities together with national administrations, social partners and unions. The EU should co-fund such awareness-raising.
2. The working conditions of firefighters must reflect their importance. Adequate pay levels, reasonable working hours, up to date protection and decontamination equipment and highest safety standards render their work safer – and more efficient.
The EU institutions should communicate this clearly towards the Member States, for instance in the context of the European Semester process. The EU institutions and European social partners should ensure a smooth cooperation with national administrations, social partners and unions to ensure that applicable EU employment legislation is respected for firefighters. This concerns, e.g. the EU working time directive, minimum wage directive and rules on personal protective equipment and health and safety at work.

3. Firefighting and emergency services must be properly staffed. Personnel shortfalls in all EU Member States jeopardize the well-functioning of our societies.
The EU institutions should call on Member States to engage in the investments that are required for this, for instance as part of the European Semester. It should be clear that expenditure in sufficient staff levels is not a social cost but an investment that will pay off as crises and disasters of various nature hit countries in Europe regularly and frequently.
4. Mental health challenges must be addressed.
The EU institutions and European social partners and trade union organisations should enhance their cooperation to address mental health challenges. They should encourage Member States to improve the access of firefighters to mental health support services, in particular in cases of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression.
5. Access to training on the job and additional flexibility for changing positions within the sector must be guaranteed.
The EU institutions and European social partners and trade union organisations should cooperation with national administrations, social partners and union organisations to improve access to training on the job and additional flexibility for changing positions within the sector, which should be guaranteed.
6. Job retention and attraction schemes must be improved to recruit new workforce and to avoid resignation.
The EU institutions should undertake to encourage Member States to improve job attraction and retention schemes in the firefighting profession, for instance as part of the annual European Semester process.
7. Research and technology must be sufficiently funded to guarantee the best levels of firefighting management and equipment.
The EU and Member States should provide increased funding for research in new technologies to guarantee the best levels of firefighting management and equipment. For example, the use of drones for early-warning mechanisms or the application of nanotechnology for better protective equipment should be further developed.
8. Firefighters must be duly informed and consulted in decision-making processes.
The EU should further encourage the Member States to duly inform and consult with firefighters and their representatives for any new measures to reform firefighting practices and processes. The personal and the unions they represent often know best how to improve services and work organisation to the benefit of all actors.
9. Third party violence against firefighters and first responders must be firmly addressed.

The EU institutions and European social partners and trade union organisations should support awareness-raising campaigns, efficient prevention and complaints procedures, and not least severe sanctions in cases of third party violence against firefighters and first responders. Zero tolerance policies must be enforced.

10. The fight against fires and the natural or human-induced disasters requires more EU commitment. The EU institutions should set up their fight against fires and the natural or human-induced disasters by
- a. *Creating and implementing a common legal status within the European framework of Civil Protection in order to protect all European 1st responders during training, exercises and operations.*
 - b. *Strengthening the EU Civil Protection Mechanism and achieving the European Disaster Resilience Goals.*
 - c. *Scaling up the resources of the rescEU reserve to tackle disasters such as wild fires, floods and earthquakes.*
 - d. *Acquiring 'Supertankers' that allow up to 20,000 litre water drops and speedy transport of equipment to and from disaster sites.*
 - e. *Developing European or international standards for equipment used by firefighters in joint missions to ensure safe and efficient action. Trade unions and social partners must be consulted when defining European standards.*
 - f. *Designing, without delay, a European strategy for combatting fires to effectively coordinate firefighting in cross-border areas or in severe national cases and to ensure available quick assistance from other countries. Compatible equipment, fire detection, deployment, and safety procedures will need to be key elements in such as strategy. It should be developed in consultation with workers and their European union and social partner representatives.*