

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 6 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.

CESI FIREFIGHTERS' MANIFESTO

ENHANCING THE WORKING CONDITIONS OF EUROPEAN FIREFIGHTERS

SIGNED IN ATHENS ON 11-12.03.2024 ON MARCH 11-12 2024

We, the undersigned, recognise the invaluable contribution of firefighters in safeguarding lives, property and the environment across Europe. Their selfless dedication and bravery in the face of adversity demand utmost respect and support. At EU level, we advocate measures for enhanced working conditions for firefighters to ensure their safety, well-being, and effectiveness in serving our communities.

Firefighters play a vital role in ensuring public safety and protecting communities from various emergencies. However, their work often exposes them to hazardous conditions, both physically and mentally. Improving firefighters' working conditions in the EU is not only a matter of safeguarding their health and well-being, but also crucial to enhance public safety and emergency response capabilities. By implementing the proposed recommendations set out in this manifesto, the EU can ensure that firefighters are better equipped, trained, protected and supported to carry out their essential duties effectively and safely, ultimately benefiting communities across the Union.

Understaffing in EU fire services is a particular problem that has reached alarming levels in many Member States and which adds to challenging working conditions. Budget constraints, demographic ageing and increasing demands on emergency services have contributed to this. According to recent reporting from CESI member organisations, a significant number of fire departments are operating with fewer personnel than recommended for optimal response capabilities. The shortage of firefighters has a direct impact on the ability to respond promptly and effectively to emergencies. Longer response times, decreased coverage in certain areas, deteriorating morale, compromised decision-making and fatigue among staff are some of the consequences of understaffing. This not only jeopardises public safety but also puts additional strain on firefighters, increasing their risk of injuries and burnout.

Demands at the EU level to improve the working conditions of fire fighters in Europe

1. Fire fighters must benefit from higher societal recognition: They risk their lives saving others.

The EU's institutions and European social partner and trade unions organisations should undertake 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-speed 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 above all the EU working time directive, minimum wage directive and rules on personal protective equipment and health and safety at work. Since firefighters are four times more likely to develop cancers than the general public and there is research pointing to the development of specific heart problems for firefighters due to stress and loud sound alarms, the EU level should encourage Member States to ensure a relevant protection of firefighters, including access to early voluntary retirement, in line with the occupational health and safety legislation.

3. Relevant minimum safety standards and good practices must be implemented.

The EU institutions should establish effective minimum safety standards for firefighting operations, including protocols for risk assessment, deployment strategies and incident command systems. These standards would serve as a benchmark for Member States to ensure that firefighters operate in safe environments and are adequately supported during emergency response efforts. Joint research of how certain procedures impact the health of firefighters (e.g. use of sound alarms for prevalence of heart conditions in firefighting) should be supported at the EU level and the findings should become recommendations for all Member States to internalise and put into practice.

4. Firefighting and emergency services must be properly staffed. Personnel shortages jeopardize the functioning of firefighting and put people and the environment in unnecessary risk.

The EU institutions should call on the Member States to engage in the investments that are required for adequate staffing levels in firefighting, for instance as part of the European Semester. The EU should clarify 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, at tremendous costs that far outweigh expenditures needed for additional firefighting personnel.

5. Mental health challenges of firefighters must be addressed: Firefighting is often emotionally challenging, with frequent exposure to traumatic situations.

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. The EU could also promote the implementation of mental health support programs tailored to firefighters' needs, such as training on stress management and resilience.

6. 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 cooperate 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.

7. Job retention and attraction schemes must be improved to recruit more new personnel and to improve retention levels of hired staff.

The EU institutions should encourage Member States to improve job attraction and retention schemes in the firefighting profession, for instance as part of the annual European Semester process.

8. Research and technology in firefighting protection, management and equipment must be sufficiently funded to guarantee the best levels of their safety.

The EU and Member States should provide increased funding for research in new technologies to guarantee the best levels of firefighting management and equipment. This could involve funding research projects focused on developing advanced firefighting equipment, enhancing communication systems, and exploring emerging risks such as climate change-related disasters. For example, the use of drones for early-warning mechanisms or the application of nanotechnology for better protective equipment should be further developed. Continued investment in research and innovation is essential to develop new technologies and strategies to improve firefighters' safety and effectiveness.

9. Firefighters and their representatives 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.

10. Collaboration and knowledge sharing must be further promoted.

Facilitating collaboration and knowledge sharing among firefighting services across the EU can foster the exchange of best practices and lessons learned. EU-level platforms should be maintained to share information on successful initiatives, innovative solution and emerging challenges, thereby promoting continuous improvements in firefighting practices.

11. Third party violence against firefighters and first responders must be firmly addressed.

The EU institutions and European social partners and trade union organisations should further 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.

12. The fight against fires and 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. This should include most notably:

- 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, including across Member States.*
- e. Developing European or even international standards for equipment used by firefighters in joint missions, to ensure their safe and efficient action. Trade unions, workers’ representatives and social partners must be consulted when defining joint standards.*
- f. Designing a European strategy to combat fires to effectively coordinate firefighting in cross-borders or in severe national cases and to ensure available quick assistance from other Member States. Compatible equipment, fire detection, deployment, and safety procedures will need to feature as key elements in such as strategy. The strategy should be developed in consultation with workers and their EU level social partner representatives.*

Signatures