



# BELGIUM

## A TRADE UNION FOCUS ON THE SDGS

#HLPF2023

**WORKERS DEMAND A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT FOR RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE**

### WORKERS NEED DURABLE RESPONSES TO THE MULTIPLE CRISES

In response to the pandemic, the Belgian government introduced a temporary unemployment scheme to prevent dismissals and support workers whose work had been reduced or suspended. This has been subsequently transformed into an 'energy insecurity' temporary unemployment scheme. In the face of the energy crisis and rising prices, the government implemented a program of energy subsidies and lowered taxes on gas and electricity. However, contrary to trade union demands, a ceiling on energy prices was not imposed, nor was a surplus windfall profit tax on energy providers implemented.

Trade unions commend the Belgian government for maintaining the wage indexation mechanism in view of the rising cost of living. Furthermore, the government introduced measures proposed by social partners to sanction abuse of daily contracts in temporary labour agencies, and to introduce an individual right to training for private sector employees.

Trade unions deplore the fact that the government extended the precarious job status of flexi jobs to more sectors; allowed employers to introduce night work without collective bargaining; and maintained the system of 'gig jobs' on digital platforms, excluding these jobs from labour protection, social security, or taxation.

### ARE TRADE UNIONS AT THE TABLE?

Belgium implements the 2030 Agenda at both the federal and regional levels. The implementation is driven by the Federal Institute for Sustainable Development, attached to the Chancellery of the Prime Minister, and under the authority of the Minister for Sustainable Development. The Inter-Ministerial Conference for Sustainable Development is the central coordination mechanism for the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at national level. However, trade unions alert that this body has not met since 2017, meaning that implementation can only take place at the federal levels.

In 2021, a new Federal Plan on Sustainable Development was introduced. Trade unions regret that the implementation of this plan lacks political will and that the SDGs are not adequately transposed into national objectives. However, since 2022, some improvements can be observed thanks to the

introduction of the European Action Plan for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Trade unions alert that a national-level plan for the SDGs is still missing in Belgium, with only federation-level plans in place. Trade unions were invited to participate in the selection of priority indicators, but they have not been informed of the follow-up. While trade unions and other civil society representatives were invited to submit their input towards Belgium's 2023 Voluntary National Review (VNR), they do not believe their contributions were taken on board. However, trade unions are regularly invited to provide inputs towards the 2030 Agenda process. While the tripartite social dialogue process does not explicitly touch upon the implementation of SDGs, trade unions believe that many collective agreements contribute to their realisation.

#### TRANSPARENCY



Regular access to limited information

#### CONSULTATION



Structured multi-stakeholder platform

#### SOCIAL DIALOGUE



social partners jointly agree and submit contributions to the national government



ABVV-FGTB



# IS THE (DECENT) WORK GETTING DONE?

On **SDG 1 (eradicate poverty)**, while indicators for **target 1.1 (eradicating extreme poverty)** show that only 0.1% of the population lived below the international poverty line in 2019, and Belgium had only 1.7% of workers working at minimum wage, the percentage of workers on low wages stood at 8.6%. In addition, 18.7% of the population was at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2023.

With regards to **target 1.3 (nationally appropriate social protection systems)**, in 2018, the coverage stood at 100% for population covered by at least one social protection benefit, including disabled people collecting disability benefits, children receiving child or family cash benefits, and vulnerable persons being covered by social assistance. However, only 63.1% of employees were covered in the event of work injury.

Further progress must be made on reaching **target 5.4 (recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work)**, as the proportion of time spent by women and girls aged 15 years old and over on unpaid domestic chores stood at 16% in 2013. Family responsibilities accounted for 20.4% of non-occupationally active women and girls aged 15-64 years old in 2021, placing Belgium behind the European Union average.

On **target 5.5 (women's full and effective participation)**, the gender pay gap stood at 5.8% in 2018, when comparing the average annual gross income of men and women, without adjusting for part time work. This reflects the substantial difference between the frequency with which women take up part time work as compared to men.

On **SDG 8 (decent work)**, efforts to promote **target 8.3 (support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalisation and growth of MSMEs)** remain to be made, as rates of informal employment in non-agricultural settings stood at 3.1% in 2021. 3% of jobs can also be classified as precarious, with the cleaning and service voucher sectors most affected by precariousness, closely followed by security, the public sector, construction and industry.

On **target 8.5 (full and productive employment and decent work for all)**, the underemployment rate stood at 9.2% in 2019, but was more than double that in the 15-24 age group (20.7%). NEET indicators for **target 8.6 (reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training)** stood at 7.4% in 2021 (down from 9.2% the year before).

Progress on **target 8.8 (protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers)** requires some improvement, as both the numbers of fatal (2.2 per 100,000) and non-fatal occupational injuries (2,234.9 per 100,000) increased in 2020, compared to 2019. While there are no violations of ILO labour rights in law, they occasionally happen in practice in Belgium, resulting in a rating of 1.66 for 2017 in the Penn State University index.

Belgium is performing relatively well on reducing social inequalities and on reaching **target 10.4 (adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality)**. With a GINI coefficient of 24.1, it has the second lowest inequality level in the EU. In 2019, the income share held by the highest 10% stood at 22.3%, while that of the lowest 20% was 9%.

To implement **SDG 13 (combat climate change)**, Belgium has adopted a National Energy and Climate Plan for which trade unions and other social partners have been consulted. A renewed plan is set to be introduced in 2023; trade unions have provided their input towards it.

On **SDG 16 (peaceful and inclusive societies)**, it is highly concerning that Belgium holds a score of 3 on the ITUC Global Rights index of 2022, meaning that regular violations of rights take place. The fact that Belgium had a score of 1 (sporadic violations of rights) in 2018 suggests that the situation for workers and trade union activity has deteriorated and must urgently be addressed.

## TRADE UNIONS ASK THAT NO-ONE IS LEFT BEHIND

Trade unions call on the Belgian government to:

- Demonstrate a strong political commitment to delivering on the 2030 Agenda.
- Facilitate an open dialogue between social partners on broader SDG objectives and the means of meeting them.
- Focus on creating more quality jobs rather than on increasing the employment rate.
- Restore the right to free wage bargaining; further increase in the gross amount of the interprofessional minimum wage; further reduce fiscal and parafiscal burdens on low wages, avoiding the creation of income traps; reverse the unilateral government interventions in the negotiated minimum wages for youth and the gig job sector.
- Ensure equality at work by combatting discrimination in hiring and at other stages of the employment relationship; address discrimination and unequal treatment more actively and in consultation with social partners; make the current legal framework on positive action more flexible and provide better information on the possibility of using positive action plans.
- Recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies, and through the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate.
- Reform the wage norm law, which is incompatible with the right to collective bargaining.



This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of TUDCN/ITUC and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union.