



Industrial relations and social dialogue
**Belgium: Working life in the
COVID-19 pandemic 2020**

Author: Dries Van Herreweghe (HIVA – KU Leuven)

Research Manager: Christine Aumayr-Pintar (Eurofound)

Eurofound reference number: WPEF21007

Related report: Eurofound (2020), COVID-19: Policy responses across Europe

© European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound), 2021

Reproduction is authorised provided the source is acknowledged.

For any use or reproduction of photos or other material that is not under the Eurofound copyright, permission must be sought directly from the copyright holders.

Any queries on copyright must be addressed in writing to: copyright@eurofound.europa.eu

Research carried out prior to the UK's withdrawal from the European Union on 31 January 2020, and published subsequently, may include data relating to the 28 EU Member States. Following this date, research only takes into account the 27 EU Member States (EU28 minus the UK), unless specified otherwise.

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) is a tripartite European Union Agency established in 1975. Its role is to provide knowledge in the area of social, employment and work-related policies according to Regulation (EU) 2019/127.

European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

Telephone: (+353 1) 204 31 00

Email: information@eurofound.europa.eu

Web: www.eurofound.europa.eu

Contents

Introduction	1
Impacts of the pandemic on working life	2
Political context	4
Governments and social partners response to cushion the effects.....	5
How COVID-19 accelerated and disrupted working life policies and impacted social dialogue	7
Accelerated developments	7
Disrupted developments.....	7
Impacts on the social dialogue and collective bargaining.....	8
Other important policy developments	9
Labour disputes in the context of the pandemic.....	10
Major developments in working time regulation as a result of the pandemic	11
Legislation on working time	11
Collective bargaining on working time.....	12
Ongoing debates on working time	12
Impacts of the crisis on wages and wage setting	13
What is new in working life in the country?	14
References.....	16

Introduction

As was the case in most other countries in Europe (and the world), Belgium has been (and still is) heavily struck by the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, there have been two waves of severe increases in the amount of sicknesses and hospitalisations. Almost every part of the entire economy has been affected in one way or another since the beginning of the pandemic and the accompanying measures in March 2020. Stringent and widespread measures have been in place early on in the crisis up to this day. At the most severe peak of the crisis in March-April last year, all sectors that were deemed non-essential were locked down for several weeks until the beginning of May, non-essential travel was prohibited, borders closed, and schools shut down.

In June the number of infections decreased, which led to an overall relaxation of the measures (both economically and socially). This wasn't without repercussions, leading to more strict measures several weeks later when numbers rose once again. Measures have been strict ever since, with certain sectors still being locked down (for example, events and entertainment sector, HORECA, hairdressers, etc.). After the summer holidays the second wave took place, leading to even more strict measures. Schools remained open however (with strict safety measures) as worries regarding development and learning problems among children started to increase.

Several new and adapted support measures were introduced to counter the economic losses and keep businesses and citizens afloat. In particular, measures like temporary unemployment, grants and subsidies and the bridging right for self-employed are important measures used by the government.

According to the Risk Management Group (a body that involves the social partners) the estimated loss in turnover for companies across the country in January was around 12%. However, this turnover loss varies significantly depending on the sector. Belgium is heavily dependent on import and export from and to other countries. Given the global nature of the pandemic, these were affected significantly as well, with a decrease in export in the third quarter of 2020 of 6% in export and 3% in import compared to the year before. Due to an unexpected positive third quarter, the Belgian economy ultimately shrank by 6.2% in 2020. The total budget deficit is estimated to be around €26 billion. To an extent because government policy and choices, employment rates have not been affected significantly. It is however to be seen if this remains to be the case, when all support measures ultimately stop.

Impacts of the pandemic on working life

De Grote Coronastudie (ENG: The Great Corona Study) is a collaboration between the University of Antwerp, KU Leuven and UHasselt. It sends out questionnaires on a range of topics since the beginning of the crisis. Some of the waves include questions on working life as well, mainly regarding the impact of work and income on mental wellbeing.

Some results that were published were:

- 24% of participants state that their total income has decreased during 2020.
- The survey follows up the usage of telework. Apart from uptake (which varies depending on the regulation currently in place) it also indicates that most of the people that continue to go to the office/workplace do so because of their own free will. But as the crisis continues on, it appears that an increasing number of supervisors requires their employees to be at the office some of the time.

A collaboration between Stepstone and KU Leuven launched a COVID-19 survey aimed specifically at work related topics, again with an important focus on mental wellbeing.

The main finding of the report is the fact that approximately one quarter of their respondents fear that they will lose their job in the future. In addition, approximately 48% of respondents stated that they are worried that the content of their job will be affected in a negative way in the future because of the virus. Another finding showed the general pessimistic view on (un)employment. At the time of the survey around 69% of respondents stated that they believe that there is a feeling of uncertainty regarding employment among the general population.

In general, older employees and blue-collar workers have shown a more pessimistic view on the situation. An additional finding was that the general feeling of uncertainty with regards to work positively correlates with a general distrust in the government. 31% Of people that feel uncertain about their job also state that their employer did not follow-up on his promises with regards to the crisis at the workplace.

Stepstone launched a survey focusing on work related topics at the beginning of the crisis mid-March. One of the main results (in March) was that approximately 51% of Belgian employees stated that their daily working routine was influenced by the pandemic. Two weeks later that percentage had increased to 89% of employees.

Another finding (in March) was that approximately 44% of employees worked from home, 33% was incapable of working due to lockdown and 23% still is obliged to go to their office/workplace.

Mental wellbeing was also measured. Whereby 25% of respondents stated that they were less productive and 16% experienced increased stress levels. The reasons for these increased stress levels were:

- 57% lack of social contact.
- 48% the feeling that they had to prove themselves to their managers
- 46% worked longer
- 43% had to combine working with taking care of children

Apart from teleworkers, people that continued to go to the office/workplace stated increased discomfort due to the situation (65%).

An interesting finding was the fact that the overall level of trust in the decision making of company management was high. In total 80% believed this was the case at the end of March (compared to 60% on the 12 March 2020). The same question was asked with regards to the trust in politicians, which showed an increase from 36% on the 12 March up to 74% at the end of March).

An international study was conducted by CASS Business School London, IESE Business School Barcelona and HR-service provider SD Worx (Belgium). The results for Belgium showed that 62% of employees still active during lockdown worked from home. Interestingly, 41% of them never did so before the crisis. Belgium thereby has one of the higher percentages of telework within Europe.

The effect of telework was another subject of the study. With regards to working time the majority (67%) of respondents stated that their working time has remained the same despite telework. 11% States that they work longer (an average of 1.5 hours) and 22% shorter (average of 2.5 hours).

At the beginning of the crisis in April, the faculty of Economics at the University of Ghent performed an online survey on the expected impact of the crisis on career outcomes and aspirations amongst employees in Flanders. In total the answers of 3,281 employees were utilized. The main findings were as follows:

- 21% of respondents were afraid of losing their job due to the crisis, 14% within the near future.
- 26% expected to miss out on promotions which they would have received otherwise.

There are differences between groups. In particular more vulnerable groups like migrants reported higher %'s. Another finding was more related to aspirations, concretely many panel members believe they will look at the labour market in a different way because of the crisis and have different work-related priorities. Remarkably, about half of the respondents indicated that they attach more importance to work-life balance and working conditions since the start of the crisis.

Political context

The political situation was tumultuous at the beginning of the crisis, as a government was still being formed (the formations had been ongoing for over a year back in February-March 2020). A government in current affairs was in place but had too little decision-making possibilities to take the necessary precautions and actions, therefore a crisis government was formed (Wilmes II). This government was a minority government that received support from the chamber of representatives. It consisted of Liberals and Christian democrats (from both French and Dutch speaking regions). The crisis government only had competence over new regulations and decisions that are related to countering the virus and its direct effects.

Despite good intentions and a plea to unite, the crisis government Wilmes I had to deal with disagreements and frictions within its government and outside of it. One example was a letter that was circulated by the Minister of Justice (De Crem) that ordered mayors and local police forces to prevent strikes or manifestations, in order to prevent large gatherings. Open Vld (also member of Wilmes I) was however not pleased with this action and stated that civil rights should be guaranteed, and Belgium is not a police state. In general, it was clear that many political parties were not at ease with certain decisions but still had to make them out of necessity. In addition, there has been an ongoing struggle between the focus on economic damage control and recovery or the need to prioritise health at all costs.

After 480 days (October 2020) a new government was finally formed, De Croo I. It was formed as a so called 'Vivaldi' coalition, consisting of socialist parties, liberal parties, green parties as well as Christian democrats.

There were no political elections in 2020. There were however social elections at the workplace, as is the case every four years (private sector only). In these elections the trade union representatives that are seated within the H&S committee (+50 employees) and works council (+100 employees) are chosen.

Governments and social partners response to cushion the effects

The government (in particular federal) has mainly relied on an extension and simplification of the existing temporary unemployment scheme for employeesⁱ. Whereby at its peak (around March and April) almost all employees within companies that were struck by the crisis direct or indirectly were allowed to make use of the system. Concretely, the employer and employee request temporary unemployment. Upon approval (which was quasi automatic during the crisis) the employee is no longer paid by the employer but instead receives a form of unemployment benefit from the government of approximately 65-70% of his/her previous wage. Some additional fixed benefits also apply as well as some sectoral additional benefits in certain sectors that made an agreement to do so. The system on the one hand reduces labour costs of companies significantly, as they longer have to pay their employees. On the other hand, the employee is guaranteed a form of income, which prevents him/her to be pushed into a financially precarious position. The main downside of the system is the fact that it is very costly for the government and that it keeps businesses afloat that would go bankrupt with or without the crisis. The system applies to all employees within the private sector. Within the public sector there is no equivalent, public servants maintain their wage regardless of their activity.

With regards to the implementation, Belgian social partners traditionally play an important role in policy and the paying out of unemployment benefits. Belgium has a quasi-Ghent system, whereby the trade unions have an important responsibility in paying out unemployment benefits (both 'regular' and temporary/economic unemployment).

For self-employed the situation is quite different, and unemployment is not applicable either. Instead they can receive premiums/loans/grants from the government (both regional and/or federal). For the self-employed in question, there is the possibility of receiving the so-called bridging right. This premium provides a steady form of income each month.

These measures are flanked by a large amount of additional support measure for people in need. There have been (and still are) a lot of different measures available for a lot of different situations. For example, to aid in energy and water costsⁱⁱ but also increases in sickness benefits and social assistance benefitsⁱⁱⁱ.

The same is the case for companies in need. There are several national and federal premiums available to companies that have suffered significant losses^{iv} or were forced to close^v. In particular for some sectors that have been closed down for several months like the events sector, HORECA and catering services but also beauty specialists or hairdressers, these types of support are crucial for their survival during and after the crisis.

The social partners were involved via the Economic Risk Management Group (ERMG) when designing the measures at the national level. This group consists of experts, chairmen and -women of several important institutions involved in the (macro) economic policy of Belgium. Both the representative employers' organisations and trade unions are represented in this body, with the chairmen and -women being delegates. The group provided advice on work related matters to the council of ministers that formed most of the national crisis measures.

Another important federal body that was involved on the federal level was the National Labour Council (CNT-NAR). This is one of the peak social dialogue bodies within the country, which consists of peak representatives of both the representative trade unions and employers' associations. They negotiated and agreed upon a new national collective agreement (CA 147)^{vi} that arranges temporary unemployment for white collar workers in companies without an existing arrangement. This allows for companies and employees that normally cannot make use of the system to be opt in as well. The council also negotiated and agreed upon more general measures to support people during financially difficult times, for example the extension of meal/eco/gift/sports/culture cheques^{vii}.

The work that has been done on the lower levels is very important as well and quite typical for the Belgian system. On the sectoral level there have been efforts by the social partners as well to mitigate the consequences of the crisis and provide support. For example, in some sectors (e.g.: the metal sector)^{viii} there have been additional premiums available to personnel that have been struck with temporary unemployment. In addition, they have provided advice and guides to companies, employers and employees on how to work safely within their respective sectors^{ix}. Especially in the periods when locked down sectors were allowed to open once again; this has proven to be important. Trade unions also played an important role in the re-opening of sectors and were sometimes critical of re-openings that in their estimation were to quick. For example, education or other sectors/companies that do not have to possibility to guarantee social distancing or other safety measures like services and cleaning within households. This has led to some frictions with both employers and employers' associations as they were often quicker in their estimation that a safe restart was possible.

On the local level the social partners also have an important role to play. The employers' associations mainly as a support and information point towards their members, both with regards to safety as well as information about financial support measures. The trade unions have an important role to play in safety and monitoring, as they are represented in health and safety committees, which are obligatory in all companies with more than 50 employees.

ⁱ Eurofound (2020), [Extension of temporary unemployment due to force majeure](#), case BE-2020-11/380 (measures in Belgium), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

ⁱⁱ Eurofound (2020), [Water and energy premium in case of temporary unemployment](#), case BE-2020-12/1053 (measures in Belgium), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin,

ⁱⁱⁱ Eurofound (2020), [Additional financial support for people in precarious situations](#), case BE-2020-23/974 (measures in Belgium), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

^{iv} Eurofound (2020), [New Flemish protection mechanism for businesses](#), case BE-2020-40/1442 (measures in Belgium), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

^v Eurofound (2020), [Brussels: One-off grant for closed businesses](#), case BE-2020-12/423 (measures in Belgium), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

^{vi} Eurofound (2020), [Extension of temporary unemployment due to force majeure](#), case BE-2020-11/380 (measures in Belgium), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

^{vii} Eurofound (2020), [Extension of meal/eco/gift/sport/culture cheques](#), case BE-2020-12/459 (measures in Belgium), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

^{viii} Eurofound (2020), [Temporary unemployment premium for employees in the metal sector](#), case BE-2020-13/1055 (measures in Belgium), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

^{ix} Eurofound (2020), [Social partners set out general guidelines for return to work](#), case BE-2020-17/845 (measures in Belgium), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

How COVID-19 accelerated and disrupted working life policies and impacted social dialogue

Accelerated developments

Currently it seems that the extension of the bridging right for self-employed is only temporary and intended as a crisis measure only. The concept also predates the current crisis.

There has been a strong emphasis on digitalization from the different governments and businesses. The Flemish government has launched some projects that have to facilitate companies to digitalize their business. A specific taskforce digitalization has been created to aid and guide the process on the regional level. One effort that was launched was an online platform/database that centralizes a wide range of initiatives that support enterprises to digitalize their working. The database is available to all and shall aid enterprises to find specific information and support programmes that suit them.

Telework in general has been promoted by the different governments from the start of the crisis and – depending on the situation – shifted from ‘strongly encouraged’ to ‘obligatory unless it is not possible due to the nature of the activity’. A recent example has been the fact that around 500 inspectors are currently physically checking companies in the service sector to see if there are people working on-site that would also be able to work from home.

In the public sector, Minister De Sutter has stated that she plans that in the future civil servants will work from home for at least 2 days per week if possible. Given that this is a significant group of people, this would be quite a significant step.

Many experts believe that the forced shift towards telework will have lasting effects on the way people work in Belgium. It is clear that a large number of employees and employers have had their first experiences with telework during this crisis. It is probable that for a part of this group, the system will remain in place after the crisis in one way or another.

Disrupted developments

There have been no large topics that were clearly postponed due to the crisis. The fact that Belgium changed governments mid-crisis might be a possible explanation why there have been no headlines about certain policy decisions being postponed or abolished. The new government (De Croo I) has been implemented in the middle of the crisis, its main goal has from the onset been to guide the country through the crisis with as little damage possible (both economically and medically).

Impacts on the social dialogue and collective bargaining

The regular social elections that take place every 4 years and normally would be held in May (11-24) were postponed because of the crisis. These elections are normally held in person at the workplace, as the entire country (in particular the private sector) was in lockdown or worked from home, this was deemed impossible (and unsafe). Instead, all elections were postponed until 16-29 November.

Many companies looked for alternatives and ways to make sure that voting would be safe and guaranteed to continue. However, despite some expectations according to a survey performed by SD-Worx online voting remained relatively rare. According to their survey approximately 15% of employees voted via an online platform. In comparison, 1/3 was able to vote via mail and 55% received an invitation to vote in person. It can however be expected that in general the necessary precautions were taken to make in-person voting safe, as there were no reports of unsafe voting conditions.

Other important policy developments

An industrial relations topic that was debated and non-Corona related was the implementation of obligatory minimal service at the regional public transport provider De Lijn. The implementation of this measure entails that there has to be a minimal form of service provided in case there are strikes at the company (which occurred sporadically in 2020 as well).

The implementation of such a rule is heavily debated and disputed by the trade unions, who believe it reduces the force of strikes in a significant way. In recent years such a measure was implemented at the national railway provider NMBS-SNCB as well (which was debated heavily as well).

The implementation of such a measure was written down in the government agreement of the current Flemish government to be implemented in this legislature. More concretely, it was written down that if after six months no agreement would be found between the trade unions, De Lijn and the government, the government shall take initiative to implement the measure after all.

Near the end of the year, no such agreement was found between the different stakeholders and the Flemish government, with Minister of Mobility Peeters, decided to carry on. A procedure has been written out for implementation that is similar to that at NMBS, whereby staff has to notify 72 hours in advance if they want to participate. This gives time to draft an alternative planning, which should be communicated to customers 24 hours in advance. Ultimately it is a less strict form of minimal service, as staff cannot be forced to come into work if they want to strike (and adhere to the procedure).

At the national level a lot of attention has gone to the Corona crisis and the different accompanying measures. Temporary unemployment and bridging right have been discussed a lot at the national level by for example the National Labour Council, as they are measures that in particular are the competence and fields of expertise of the social partners. However, it seems that nevertheless a lot of other regular topics were still discussed as well, and negotiations and discussions continued. This is clear when looking at the number and range of topics that were treated in their advices and collective agreements. Elements like burn-out, diversity at the workplace, training, innovative work organisation, etc. were still being treated.

Labour disputes in the context of the pandemic

It is too early to already have data on the amount of working days lost due to actions in 2020. Based on media output, it seems however that there were relatively few strikes due to the crisis. There has been regular critique coming from the health sector, mainly due to lack of financing/resources or certain governmental decisions. However, these actions were mostly symbolic in nature with hardly any strikes (if any at all). There have however been strikes in prisons, as prison staff was worried about their health and safety when certain decisions to relax some strict measures were made.

At the brewery of AB Inbev in Jupille there was a ten-day strike after a COVID-19 outbreak within the facility. Out of solidarity two other breweries of the chain went on strike as well for a short time.

There were also some smaller and more sporadic actions at supermarkets (Colruyt, Aldi) as they find they were not supported and remunerated enough for the additional work and dangers that they have had to deal with during the current crisis. The supermarkets have remained open during the entire lockdown, in addition there were periods with minor hoarding behaviour, increasing pressure on supermarkets and their personnel. In some cases, personnel went on strike because of lacking safety precautions.

Serious issues arose and led to sporadic strikes at the large clothing chain FNG (with Brantano being their most prominent branch). The situation of the chain and its employees has been unclear for a long time, leading to concern amongst employees and in some cases even temporary discontinuation of wages. The chain ultimately declared bankruptcy after banks refused to provide them additional funding to continue their activities.

The fact that many companies have been closed down or reduced their activities might be a possible part of the explanation why there seemed to be relatively little reports on large strikes. In addition, it might be that the COVID-19 crisis somewhat directed away the attention from certain other problems/topics of discussion at the workplace. Finally, the fact that many businesses are struggling to stay afloat might lead trade unions to be more careful with undertaking action that cost employers' money. However, all of these possible explanations currently remain unproven.

Throughout the crisis it however became apparent that there are fundamental problems within the care sector that are gradually coming to the surface. A lack of investments in past years, understaffing and dangerous working conditions have all been criticised in the past months and led to sporadic actions. These actions were however relatively small in size and local, as care personnel is currently occupied with providing care and aid. Additional funding and resources have been promised a few times and by several ministers, it is however probable that more and larger actions will take place in the future after the health crisis has passed. Trade unions within the sector have hinted at the possibility on different occasions.

Major developments in working time regulation as a result of the pandemic

Legislation on working time

Because of the crisis a specific form of parental leave was implemented, namely: corona parental leave. This specific form of parental leave was implemented to facilitate parents in combining work and taking care of children.

Parents with children younger than 12 years old (for children with a disability there is no age restriction) are able to reduce their working time by one half or one fifth¹ in the period between the 1 May or 30 December. Parents that are eligible to receive a compensation from the government to alleviate some of the income loss. The system is open to all employees, regardless of type of activity, public or private sector, etc.

For many parents this measure was quite important as they were forced to work from home and unable to send their children to school, care or grandparents due to the lockdown. The system of parental leave already existed, this form is however supplementary. This means that days of Corona-parental leave do not count for the regular parental leave system.

Another system was the Corona time credit system^x. Time credit is a specific system that already existed before the Corona crisis. It was originally meant as a way for employees to take a form of leave to either follow a specific education/training or provide care for someone (under certain circumstances other reasons are allowed as well). The employee in question receives a benefit from the federal unemployment services instead of a wage during this period of absence.

In the context of the COVID-19 crisis another variant was implemented. The principle is similar to the existing time credit system, however the conditions to apply are entirely different.

The first important condition is the fact that the company of the employee must be formally recognised as being in difficulty and/or restructuring. In contrast to the classic form of time credit it has nothing to do with the employee following training/education or providing care. Whereas the classic time credit is mostly formulated from the viewpoint of the employee, it is that they apply and require leave for a training or care. In case of the Corona time credit it is mostly a way for employers to reduce their labour costs, while employees have the benefit of maintaining a certain level of income as well as their job. The Corona time credit can take the form of a reduction in work performance by up to half or a reduction in work performance by one fifth.

The duration of the corona time credit is a minimum of one month and a maximum of six months. The corona time credit can be renewed without the need for the new period to be immediately equal to the previous period. However, each individual period must be at least one month, and the total duration cannot exceed six months.

The full duration of the corona time credit must be during the period of recognition of the business as a firm in difficulty or undergoing restructuring.

¹ In some cases (single parents, parents with a disability), a 100% reduction in working time is possible.

Collective bargaining on working time

There have been no major changes in working time regulations via collective bargaining due to the crisis. There have been discussions and negotiations on the company and sectoral levels.

Ongoing debates on working time

A debate that has been going on for several years and is still relevant is the usage of night work and more flexible forms of work. Because of the COVID-19 crisis and its lockdown, e-commerce has increased significantly. The different e-commerce platforms make use of large amounts of flexible labour and night work, as speed of delivery is an important factor. Belgium is however quite strict in regulating night work and other forms of flexible labour. This has led some large e-commerce providers to build their logistical facilities in neighbouring countries close to the Belgian borders. Employers' associations like VOKA demand more flexible forms of work, to attract more e-commerce platforms and logistical centres to Belgium as well as spread employees over time as a way to work safer. Trade unions however have always been critical of flexible forms of work and extensive use of night work, as it is bad for employee health.

The debate has not been at the forefront that much but sporadically came in the news. It is however possible that it will continue to intensify over time as the situation and economy stabilises and the shape of the post-crisis economy becomes clearer.

* Eurofound (2020), [Time credit for employees of companies in difficulty and/or restructuring due to COVID-19](#), case BE-2020-10/1210 (measures in Belgium), COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch, Dublin.

Impacts of the crisis on wages and wage setting

A significant emphasis of both the government and the trade unions during the crisis was to maintain a stable income for employees/temporary unemployed. This has to some extent been successful with no reports of wage decreases (which in any case is rare within the Belgian system).

However, some people have lost a part of their wage due to the nature of the crisis. Apart from job loss or the reduction in income due to temporary unemployment some people will have noticed an actual decrease in wage due to the crisis. For example, people of which a part of their wage is variable will most likely have noticed a reduction due to reduced activity or no activity at all. A report by Eight Advisory states that for white collar workers approximately 5-15% of their wage is variable, for management function this can be up to 30%.

Other often used systems are the so-called collective bonuses that are arranged via collective agreement nr. 90. It is likely that in many companies these types of collective bonuses will not be applied during 2021 as a cost saving measure.

Another important way in which wages could have diminished was via organizational changes made by the employer himself. This has been made clear by a research done by HR service provider Securex. According to their data, in March 2020 blue collar workers worker 25% less hours compared to March 2019, for white collar workers this was 11%. The amount of (paid) overtime has diminished by 28% amongst blue collar and 32% amongst white collar workers.

What is new in working life in the country?

Extensive utilization of temporary unemployment system

The temporary unemployment system was used in the previous economic crisis in the years 2000. This crisis it has become the main tool for the Belgian government to counter the negative financial effects for companies and employees. It reduces costs for companies that are unable to perform their activities at a regular level. For employees it provides a stable form in income and financial stability. At this moment the system is evaluated quite positively. It has prevented social hardship for a large number of employees and is currently preventing a lot of company from severe financial problems due to accumulating labour costs.

Increase of telework

The use of telework was a significant shift that without the crisis would probably have taken a much longer period of time to take place. The small amount of research that is currently available suggests that around one quarter of people that teleworked during the crisis did so for the first time. The experiences for both employers and employees with the concept will probably have a lasting effect in many cases. Especially given the Belgian traffic problems during peak hours, it is probable that telework will continue to be promoted by the government in the future. This is clear as the current Minister of civil servants Petra De Sutter has announced that civil servants will continue to work from home for 2 days once the crisis has passed.

Need to improve working conditions of essential front-line workers

The pressure on front line workers has been clear from very early on in the crisis. Many prominent figures within the sector have come forward to state the significant pressure that the entire sector is undergoing and the risk of it collapsing if the crisis continues and/or increases in intensity.

Even before the current crisis the sector has been faced with understaffing and other problems. The combination of ongoing problems in the sector and the sudden spike because of the crisis has led to some improvements in for example remuneration of the sector. One of those is that care personnel will receive an increase in wage of on average 6%. However, the problem of understaffing in medical facilities and care homes continues. It is possible that the crisis will lead to some care professionals leaving the sector due to their experiences during the crisis. On the other hand, it might lead to an increase in new employees entering the sector due to the increased visibility, general praise for the sector and improvements of working conditions. The latter still has to be made more concrete, but a lot of promises were made by several ministers for the future of the health sector.

Support for self-employed

As was the case with temporary unemployment, the existing system of bridging-right was extended and made more accessible. It has become clear that support for self-employed is crucial, in particular in a small country as Belgium that is characterized by a large number of SME's.

Various premiums and additional forms of remuneration

All governments (regional and national) have implemented different types of premiums and other forms of additional remuneration in order to prevent people from ending up in financial precarious situations. There are the fixed premiums on top of the temporary unemployment benefit (both national and in some cases sectoral). Different forms of consumption cheques have been distributed to support people and local businesses at the same time. At the beginning of the crisis there were water and energy premiums available that were linked to the temporary unemployment benefit.

References

All cases related to Eurofound's COVID-19 EU PolicyWatch database can be found at <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/data/covid-19-eu-policywatch>

De Morgen (2020), 'More than 500 inspectors start controlling for telework, starting today.', 5 januari.

De Standaard (2020), 'De Sutter wants two days of working from home for civil servants.', 5 November.

De Tijd (2020), 'Peeters proposes own minimal service for De Lijn.' 11 December

De Tijd (2020), 'Strike at Carrefour due to Corona measures.' 3 April

De Tijd (2020), 'Strike at Delhaize due to Corona measures.' 1 April.

De Tijd (2020), 'Strike at Jupiler brewery on its last legs.' 14 September.

De Tijd (2020), 'Supermarket personnel is angry over the absence of Corona support.' 2 November.

De Witte, H., and Van Hootehem, A. (2020), 'Tastte Corona Ook De Kwaliteit Van De Arbeid Aan? ', in *Steunpunt Werk, Over Werk: Tijdschrift van het Steunpunt Werk*, Uitgeverij Acco, 30(2), 39-45.

HLN.be (2020), 'This is the impact of Covid-19 on your wage.' 24 December

HLN.be (2020), 'Wilmès II waltzes on wobbly legs: our journalist sees doubts about renewal in June.', 8 April.

Jobat.be (research by Securex) (2020), *How much less work is done because of Covid-19?*, web page

Sdworx (2020), *About one in six can vote for social elections electronically within the coming two weeks.*, web page

Sdworx (2020), *Four out of ten employees started teleworking for the first time due to Corona.*, web page

Stepstone (2020), *The Impact of the Coronavirus on Belgian employees*, web page

Uantwerpen (2020), *Results Large Corona Study*, web page

Voka.be (2020), *VOKA releases relance plan for the labour market, intervention is necessary to save jobs and companies.*, web page

VRT.be (2020), 'Strike in prisons against softening of Corona rules for visits: trade unions deem it too early.' 22 September.

WPEF21007

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) is a tripartite European Union Agency established in 1975. Its role is to provide knowledge in the area of social, employment and work-related policies according to Regulation (EU) 2019/127.

Disclaimer: This working paper has not been subject to the full Eurofound evaluation, editorial and publication process.