

Protecting citizenship rights of young mobile European workers

Alternatives Européennes contribution to the consultation on the EU citizenship report 2020

European Alternatives is a transnational civil society organisation which has existed since 2007, and is registered in several countries in the EU and in the UK. Over the course of its many activities across the continent it has worked with tens of thousands of young Europeans as volunteers and participants, most frequently in the 20 to 35 age group. We have been aware throughout this time of the challenges that young Europeans face when they move to another country in terms of being well informed about their rights as European citizens, and being able to access and defend these rights. This is particularly the case for young Europeans who have just entered the workforce, perhaps after a period of study in another country, or after moving for personal or family reasons. The transition to work is a moment in life where many people are particularly vulnerable, and this is even more the case for young people who have moved to another country. These young workers are more likely to be on short term or temporary contracts, doing seasonal work, working part time or doing platform work, and are likely to be on lower incomes than older parts of the workforce, and more likely to be doing undeclared work.

Mobile young workers often face difficulties in ensuring their rights at work are fully respected, either because of unscrupulous or ill-informed employers, or because of their own lack of knowledge, experience and sources of guidance. Problems we have documented include having timely access to employment contracts and payslips, attestations from employers, understanding their pay and knowing what to do if they experience discrimination, or their work and pay is not properly declared to the authorities.

These problems at work can all have a direct impact on the young workers being able to access their rights as European citizens: without payslips or a work contract it can be impossible to rent an apartment, or access social security, or prove they have the right to remain in a country, and if pay is inadequately reported by employers this can lead to problems in proving a right to remain.

If access to rights amongst this group has been worsening for some time, in 2020 with the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns, it is clear to us on the basis of our surveys conducted in 6 countries that this situation is now significantly worse. Young mobile workers reported to us difficulties in accessing furlough schemes, confusion amongst employers about the rights of resident European citizens in the context of lockdowns leading to discrimination or difficulties in having work-related documents, and difficulties in accessing healthcare and social services. In some cases young mobile workers have reported being put in more risky working situations than their home-nation colleagues. With travel restrictions in place young mobile workers have been at risk of being even more isolated and lonely than they might otherwise be, and also can be trapped in bad jobs: unable to travel home to get advice, encouragement and guidance, or to leave jobs where they feel ill treated for fear of not having the right to access social security or the right to remain in the country in the context of indefinite periods of restriction.

In the context of the combined recession and pandemic that Europe is now entering, all of these risks to the European citizenship rights of young Europeans are increased. It is vitally important not only that the European Union supports the rights of young Europeans to move, but also follows up to ensure the continued protected and effective access to these rights over the course of the mobility of an individual, and in particular in the vulnerable phase of transition to work.

For these reasons, we call on the European Commission to specifically address the rights of young mobile workers in the European Citizenship report 2020, with a view to targeted initiatives which can specifically help this group.

Such initiatives could include:

Providing better information, in a youth friendly format, all in one place:

At the moment, information about European citizenship rights and about rights at work is scattered across many websites, is presented in a way that is not adapted for youth, and is not focused on enabling citizens to resolve problems they might have. A central website with information on the complete rights young people who are mobile in Europe have is required, designed in a way which relates to the kinds of problems young people might experience, and enabling them to know who to contact or what to ask for to resolve their problems.

Any young person who accepts a job offer through EURES or similar EU services should get targeted information on their rights and know who to contact if they experience problems. The information currently on the EURES website concerning living and working in different countries is wholly inadequate.

Introduce a model working contract for young workers

Introduce a model EU young worker contract to be used by employers, which every young person working in the EU knows they have the right to, and which they know has by necessity specific information about their rights, pay, hours and working conditions. This working contract will be accepted by landlords, banks and social security in each EU country as proof of employment.

Coordinate with the European Labour Authority, and with the EU youth strategy

The effective access of young mobile European workers to their citizenship rights concerns multiple domains of Commission activity and of European law. The Commission should better coordinate and integrate initiatives and communication particularly between the European Labour Authority, DG Employment and the EU youth strategy with DG Justice working on citizenship, to ensure the comprehensibility of Commission action amongst its citizens and joined-up policy-making. Studies of the ways lack of effective access to rights in one policy area can lead to European citizens being unable to access their rights in another would be welcome.

Training of employers

Our surveys of young workers suggest that employers are not all aware of the rights of mobile Europeans, or the specific kinds of vulnerability that young mobile Europeans entering into the workplace experience. This is perhaps particularly the case in small and medium sized companies, although abuses in larger companies are also common. The Commission should consider providing better information, and offering training particularly for new employers and people who start a business.

Integrate knowledge of citizenship rights and rights as a worker to formal education

In the programs the Commission is responsible for, such as the ERASMUS+ program, education concerning citizenship rights and rights as a worker could be more central; both as a necessary unit of study for any student who has an Erasmus mobility grant, as priorities of the ERASMUS+ program funding for projects of universities and civil society organisations.

In addition to this European citizenship education including a preparation for the world of work is a necessary complement to European citizenship as such. Perhaps through increasing its centrality to the Erasmus+ scheme, the Commission would open the way to national curricula better encompassing European Citizenship education.