

REPORT



ETUCE Online Seminar on Long COVID-19

## **What challenges for education trade unions across Europe?**

20 September 2022

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# Introduction

The ETUCE Online Seminar on Long COVID-19: What challenges for education trade unions across Europe? took place on 20 September 2022, gathering more than 50 education trade unionists from across Europe. Building on the findings of the ETUCE study on the [impact of the COVID-19 Omicron variant](#), the Seminar sought to raise awareness on the serious issue of Long COVID-19 and foster education trade union actions to enhance the protection of education workers affected by the Long COVID-19 condition.

Opening the Seminar, [Susan Flocken, ETUCE's European Director](#), underlined the persistent effects of the pandemic on the teaching profession and education systems across Europe and emphasised the essential need to ensure a sustainable and fair Recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, she called for addressing the medium- and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the education sector.

The event shed light on the scientific evidence regarding the Long COVID-19 condition and its labour-market impact on the education sector. It provided the opportunity to discuss concrete actions to protect education workers in dialogue with public health and occupational health and safety experts as well as trade union specialists. The meeting was also a platform for education trade unions to exchange and discuss national experiences, challenges, and strategies to address Long COVID-19 in the education sector.



# The Long COVID-19 condition. A scientific perspective

Dr Pierre Smith, Researcher, UCLouvain and Sciensano (Belgium), presented a scientific definition of the Long COVID-19 condition and the preliminary results of Sciensano's study [COVIMPACT](#).

## Scientific definition of long covid

According to the definition provided by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence ([NICE](#)), Long COVID-19 occurs when signs and symptoms developed during or after an infection consistent with COVID-19 are reported three months after infection and are not explained by an alternative diagnosis. Nevertheless, Dr Smith warned of the difficulty in defining scientifically Long COVID-19 due to the high heterogeneity of symptoms. Besides, the existence of several definitions of Long COVID-19 can lead to different scientific results.

Sciensano's study COVIMPACT. Based on the NICE's definition, Sciensano's study [COVIMPACT](#) analyse the medium and long-term impact of Long COVID-19 through a holistic approach. The study, conducted from April 2021 to April 2023, consisted of quarterly surveys addressing patients who tested positive for COVID-19. The preliminary findings showed that 47% of participants were affected by Long COVID-19 three months after the COVID-19 infection. This share dropped to 32% after six month from the infection.



## Risk factors. Who is more exposed to Long COVID-19?

With 56% of affected patients being women, COVIMPACT revealed a higher exposure of women to the risk of contracting Long COVID-19. Most studies on Long COVID-19 corroborate this evidence with different explanations. On the one hand, a sociological hypothesis points to a higher women's likability to self-report Long COVID-19 symptoms. On the other hand, a biological hypothesis suggests a more reactive immune system in women, which is associated with a greater risk of developing Long COVID.

## Impact on the quality of life

COVIMPACT analysed the evolution of the quality of life, by examining the Quality-of-Life-Score in different timeframes. The study findings showed that after three months from the infection, individuals affected by Long COVID-19 reported a significant lower score of life compared to recovered patients. The quality of life for individuals having Long COVID-19 further decreased six months after the infection.

## Impact on mental health

The study analysed the evolution of anxiety and depression in relation to Long COVID-19. The study found that anxiety and depression radically increased in patients with Long COVID after three months from the COVID-19 infection. Data worsened even further after six months from the infection.

## Impact on the employment and economic situation

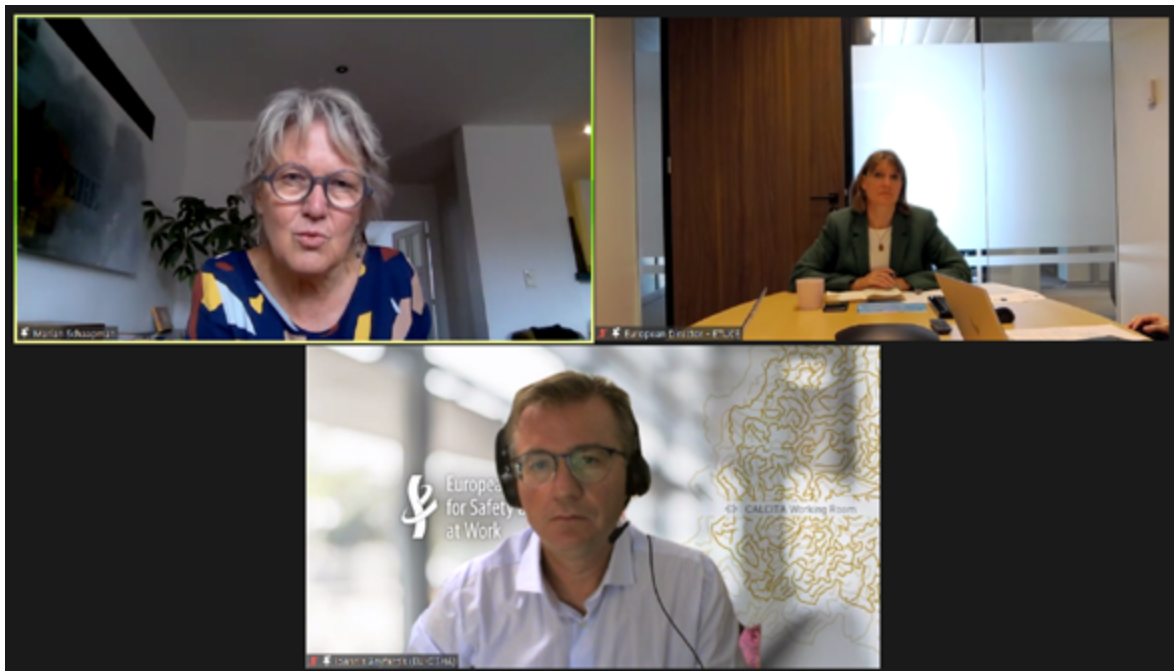
The average number of sick leave days for individuals affected by Long COVID-19 (i.e., 23 days) is more than double compared of participants with no symptoms (i.e., 11 days). In addition, 37% of participants with Long COVID-19 reported higher financial loss compared to 18% of those without symptoms.

More information on the study COVIMPACT and the full report of the study are available [here](#).

# A labour-market approach. Long COVID-19 and the stakes for the trade union movement

## Return-to-work after COVID-19 and Long COVID

Dr Ioannis Anyfantis, Project Manager, Prevention and Research Unit, EU-OSHA, presented multiple tools developed by EU-OSHA to protect the health and safety of workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. These included COVID-19 guidance for the workplaces and a specific OIRA tool for COVID-19. To address the issue of Long COVID-19, EU-OSHA developed a twin guide for workers and managers to arrange the return-to-work of employees affected by Long COVID-19. In order to ensure an effective return to work, the EU-OSHA guides recommended having a return-to-work meeting with the involvement of a trade union representative. Workers and employers should jointly arrange the transition period, including a possible temporary adjustment of cognitive, physical, and emotional aspects of the job (e.g., workload, working hours, equipment adjustments). Additionally, the guide for managers highlighted the importance that employers apply a step-by-step approach and analyse the specific needs of the workers, including through an individualised health risk assessment. Concluding the presentation, Dr Anyfantis, the need to adopt a holistic approach to tackling the effects of Long COVID on workers.



## The importance of recognising COVID-19 as an occupational disease

**Marian Schaapman, Head of unit Health & Safety and working conditions, ETUI**, spoke about COVID-19 as an occupational disease and the importance of its recognition in the legislation. She highlighted this as an essential step for COVID-19 prevention, especially in contact works, such as the teaching profession, where work is a key vector of contamination of the COVID-19 virus. Besides, she pointed to the long-term impact of COVID-19 and the severe economic and financial impact as strong arguments for recognising COVID-19 as an occupational disease. Indeed, recent findings from the World Health Organisation (WHO) highlighted that Long COVID has a serious impact on people's ability to return to work or have a social life. From a survey conducted in 57 countries, it emerged that only 27,3% of people affected by long COVID could work as many hours as they use to do before becoming ill, while 33,3% were not working at all.

She highlighted that, while the recognition of COVID-19 as an occupational disease should occur at national level, supportive tools exist at international and EU level. In particular, ILO Convention C121 established workers' right to be compensated in case of an occupational disease. At EU level, the same provision was reported in the EU Commission's Recommendation concerning the European schedule of occupational disease (2003). Nevertheless, the right to compensation is subject to the need for proof of work-relatedness of the disease. The annexes to the EU Commission's recommendation respectively include diseases which have been already scientifically proven (Annex 1) and scientifically suspected (Annex 2) to be related to certain working conditions/exposure. As a result of long negotiations between workers and employers, Ms Schaapman reported that the EU Commission's Tripartite Advisory Committee on Safety and Health (ACSH) advised adding COVID-19 to Annex 1 of the Recommendation with the following wording: 'COVID-19 caused by work in disease prevention, in health and social care and in domiciliary assistance, or in a pandemic context, in sectors where there is an outbreak in activities in which a risk of infection has been proven'.

# Perspectives and experiences of education trade unions in addressing the Long COVID-19 syndrome

Education trade union representatives from different countries exchanged their experiences, challenges, and strategies at a national level in addressing the Long Covid-19 syndrome in the education sector.

## Belgium

**Muriel Vigneron, SLFP-Enseignement (Belgium)**, highlighted the Long COVID-19 situation in the French-speaking part of Belgium. According to the national labour law, once teachers used up their sick leave entitlement, their work status turned into officio availability (en disponibilité). In this case, workers receive only 80% of their salary (with a regressive system over time). Eventually, they can be pushed for early retirement. In Belgium, even young teachers faced this situation, with a serious impact on their career and social life. Nevertheless, Ms Vigneron warned that a possible administrative underreporting seemed occurring in Belgium as the requests of support received by education trade unions were not reflected in the data of the Ministry of Education of Wallonia, declaring only 21 cases of Long COVID-19 in March 2021.

**Jos Wouters, C.O.C. (Belgium)**, reported that as of April 2022, the Flemish-speaking part of Belgium recognised COVID-19 as an occupational disease. With the regard to the need for proof, patients affected by COVID-19 have to prove that at least five workers in the same work environment were infected in two weeks. Besides, it is necessary to prove that working facilitates infection.

## The Netherlands

**Tamar Van Gelder, AOb (The Netherlands)**, presented the main challenges related to COVID-19, including protecting education workers in education institutions. She reported that in February 2022, AOb opened a contact point for the employees suffering from Long COVID. Within a month, the union received 1100 reports of Long COVID cases. Among these, 80% were teachers, while 60% reported having been infected in the workplace. To address the issue, AOb addressed education employers individually, calling for an extension of the period of sick pay and suspending the application for social security benefits. In addition, AOb asked for more time for reintegration and recovery and provision for additional payments (extra income, compensation for medical expenses). The union further addresses the government weekly putting forward demands for improving ventilation in schools, increasing income security in case of long-term illness.



and prioritising education employees within the vaccination scheme. Finally, the union put forward an appeal to set up a fund for people suffering from Long COVID-19. As a direct support to members, AOb provided legal, social aid and integration support. It further organised webinars and gatherings for information sharing.

## Poland

**Slawomir Broniarz, ZNP (Poland)**, emphasised the unpreparedness of the Polish education system on multiple levels against the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to major stress for education personnel. He further regretted the lack of cooperation of the Ministry of Education in protecting and supporting the health and safety of teachers and education personnel.

**Tomasz Gryczan, Solidarnosc (Poland)**, highlighted the crucial role of collaboration between Polish education trade unions and the Social Labour Inspectors to assess the impact of Long COVID-19 on the national education system. He explained that under the Polish Labour Law, the Social Labour is responsible for overseeing the health and safety of teachers and education personnel through regular controls in education institutions. In order to monitor the issue of Long COVID-19 among education workers, the union commissioned the inspectors to conduct a specific survey among teachers. The findings showed that symptoms of COVID-19 generally disappeared within a few weeks. However, some cases of Long COVID-19 in the education sector were reported. The most common symptoms reported by the patients were bronchial issues, dizziness, sleeplessness, and concentration difficulties. The study concluded that defeating and counteracting the post-COVID-19 syndrome was expected to be a long and tedious process requiring specific tools adapted to the case-by-case situation.

## Portugal

**Maria Luisa Batista Pires, FNE (Portugal)**, pointed out the challenges to occupational health and safety of education workers in Portugal. With the intertwined effect of COVID, including Long COVID, and other demographic factors such as the ageing of the education workforce, an increasing number of education workers in Portugal were undergoing health treatment and suffering psychosocial risks. She noted that these multifold issues added an additional toll on teachers' workload in the context of a serious teacher shortage.

## The United Kingdom

**Wayne Bates, NASUWT (The United Kingdom)**, reported data from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) estimating a higher incidence of Long COVID-19 among education workers (4%) compared to 2.5% (2 million) in the general population in the UK. As NASUWT noticed a consistent gap between the ONS data and the cases declared by the employers, it conducted a survey among members. The findings showed that among members affected by Long COVID-19, only 26%

declared it to their employer. According to the survey results, the main reasons for the underreporting were related to the fear of possible punitive actions by their employers and/or negative impact on their future employment and promotion prospects (1 in 5 members). The survey further revealed the fear of social stigma around Long COVID-19 syndrome. Only 16% of NASUWT members declared that Long COVID-19 did not impact their work. Mr Bates reported some of the main challenges in addressing Long COVID-19. These include a) Unequal employer support; b) Inconsistency and access to treatment in some areas of the; c) Difficulties in accessing ill health pension for education workers who are unable to work due to Long COVID-19; d) The recognition of Long COVID-19 under the disability legislation as crucial to support education workers and protect them from discrimination.

**Bola Okuboyeio, NEU (The United Kingdom)**, informed that NEU, ASCL, NAHT, NASUWT, Unite, Unison, GMB and Voice/Community have agreed a Joint Protocol for workplace management of Long COVID-19. The protocol is a basis for negotiation with employers with several measures to protect and support education staff affected by Long COVID-19. Ms. Okuboyeio emphasized the importance of risk assessments for education workers affected by Long COVID-19, which must be conducted in consultation between the workers and the manager as part of the health and safety agenda.



# Conclusions

The ETUCE Online Seminar on Long COVID-19 highlighted the increasing relevance of the issue of Long COVID-19 for the health and safety of teachers, academics, and other education personnel across Europe.

Scientific evidence on Long COVID-19 showed a higher exposure of women to the risk of having Long COVID-19 symptoms. This is particularly concerning for the education sector, where women represent almost 75% of the workforce at the European level. Furthermore, education trade unions should monitor with close attention the impact of Long COVID-19 on the mental health of workers and their employment situation. The scientific findings in this regard showed as Long COVID-19 adds an additional layer of complexity whilst education systems across Europe are confronted with decreasing attractiveness of the teaching profession, a serious teacher shortage, and worsening psychosocial risks.

The clear relevance of Long COVID-19 as an occupational health and safety issue calls for effective preventive measures against the COVID-19 virus, even beyond the pandemic times. This is particularly important for the education sector, as due to its nature, the teaching profession constitutes a key vector of contamination of the COVID-19 virus. Therefore, advocating for the recognition of COVID-19 as an occupational disease, including the provision of compensation, is essential to ensure that education workers have adequate protection for their right to healthy and safe working environments. In this regard, [ILO Convention C121](#), establishing workers' right to compensation in relation to occupational diseases, and the [EU Commission's Recommendation concerning the European schedule of occupational disease](#) (2003) are important tools to be implemented at a national level.

In this context, ensuring a meaningful social dialogue and close cooperation with education trade unions is of utmost value to implement effective measures adapted to the needs of education workers affected by Long COVID-19 both during the sickness period and in the phase of return to work.

The online Seminar was also a valuable platform for education trade unions to share experiences from different national contexts in addressing Long COVID-19. Concrete trade actions being implemented at a national level included: regular consultation with members to assess the situation of Long COVID-19 on the ground, including consultation with Social Labour Inspectorates; publication of protocols for workplace management of Long COVID-19 as a basis for negotiation with employers; the opening of contact points for members; case-by-case social dialogue with education employers; as well as advocating improved social security measures for workers affected by Long COVID.

ETUCE is committed to supporting its member organisations in their work in ensuring healthy and safe work environments in the education sector and favour cooperation and exchanges on Long COVID among education trade unions across Europe.