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Vlaanderen

Coping with climate change in the care sector

Workers' guide



ITUC CSI IGB



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The past years have demonstrated that climate change is a reality. Heat waves and severe weather events are becoming more common. While still battling the COVID-19 pandemic, the care sector is also on the front line in dealing with these climate change consequences.

The effects of climate change will only get worse, and we must prepare ourselves. The stories from care workers in this guide show that this is not easy to achieve with heavy workloads, staff shortages and outdated buildings. Still, they are already making every effort to ensure that their work remains workable, even in a changing climate.

What will be the impact of climate change on the work of nurses, care providers, teachers, childcare workers and the many other – mostly female – workers who keep the wider care

sector running? How do we prepare ourselves for this impact? How do we talk about it? What are good examples of initiatives that combine care, sustainability and decent work?

There is a pressing need for long-term policy to adapt our care sector to climate change. Unions and workers can play a very important role in this dialogue with governments and employers. In this guide you will find the tools you need to get started. The analysis presented is based on research material and interviews with workers in the sector. The guide is based on the Flemish situation but can be a start and inspiration for union work everywhere.



THE SITUATION TODAY



In our workplace the problem of heat has evolved in the past several years from

an issue requiring work to a constant concern. On hot days, preventing dehydration is of the utmost importance.

- Patricia Langoiroux, nurse in a residential care home.

Belgium has a national [ozone and heat plan](#) since 2005. This plan describes how the Belgian population will be warned when public health problems are expected during periods of very hot weather. It also takes into account the ozone concentrations because they have an additional negative effect on public health during heat periods. The plan includes a vigilance phase (from 15 May to 30 September) in which awareness is raised towards vulnerable groups, a warning phase (when temperature reaches 28 °C) in which measures are taken and an alarm phase. In Belgium, the regions are responsible for phases 1 and 2. The Flemish Agency for Care and Health communicates with the care institutions. Most healthcare institutions in Flanders work with their own heat plan, usually inspired by the national plan. Compliance with the national heat plan is only controlled in the residential care centres.



Our heat plans are working really well, so there is less excess mortality.

The residents are given more drinks with breakfast and between meals, exercises are replaced by refreshing foot baths and all food is freshly prepared. Hot meals are sometimes replaced with salads, although the residents are not very keen on them (laughs). The difficulty is that all this means more work."

- Dennis De Meyer, nurse in a residential care home.

In 2020 we saw the hottest year ever in Europe. Worldwide, the past six years have been the hottest six years ever recorded. These temperature increases are accompanied by extreme weather phenomena such as floods, droughts and forest fires, which are gradually becoming more intense and more frequent. There is a consensus among scientists that these are consequences of climate change. We have ten years to reduce our CO₂ emissions by at least 50 per cent and thus to stabilise the temperature increase at 1.5°C.

Unfortunately, after the exhausting pandemic, the care sector – together with emergency and rescue services – is on the front line of climate change. Care workers are directly confronted by the effects of climate change on health, such as heat, increasing risk of floods and severe weather events. In addition, this sector will see the effects of other, more indirect consequences of climate change, such as the [increase in allergic diseases and carriers of disease](#). Worldwide, the [World Health Organization](#) expects that between 2030 and 2050 there will be 250,000 additional deaths due to malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stroke as a result of climate change. Finally, consequences are expected in relation to the disruption of social, political or economic systems. These could lead to an increase in aggression and violence, a problem that care workers are already increasingly experiencing today. During the heat wave in Europe in 2003, more than 70,000 extra deaths were registered. It is estimated that during the heat wave in Belgium in 2019 there were 2000 additional hospital admissions.



The condition of the buildings

The care facilities themselves are often not designed for the changing weather conditions: during the flood in Liège in the summer of 2021, the staff could not get to the hospital, while in London ambulances were unable to reach certain hospitals.

Today, 7.3 per cent of public institutions in Belgium are at risk from dangerous flooding. Due to their location – in urban areas with a lot of concrete and little green space – many care facilities are also at risk from the ‘heat island effect’, whereby the heat is retained and temperatures can rise to seven to eight degrees higher than in surrounding areas. By 2021 this percentage is expected to double to 15%. On its climate portal, Flanders has created a useful [map](#) showing the risk of flooding for vulnerable facilities.

The condition of the buildings makes work difficult for care personnel. One student nurse said: “We run around sweating, then we get cold and end up sick because we are always wet with sweat. Our employer installed sun screens but really the building

is too outdated to improve the situation.”

Since renovation is often only cost-effective in the very long term, in many cases the care sector prefers new construction. And that does not happen overnight. “From now until 2029 we will have to sweat it out, both literally and figuratively,” says Yves Derycke, ACOD union president at UZ Gent [Ghent University Hospital] while waiting for a new building: “Last summer it was 38 degrees or more in some patient rooms. Imagine, you have just had a transplant operation... It does have an impact. We are using ad-hoc solutions, such as lighter clothing and mobile air conditioners that use a lot of electricity, but it is like trying to mop up with the water still running.”



Time for climate adaptation

Well-planned, timely adaptation measures can save money in the future and, more importantly, save lives. [According to the European Commission](#), every euro spent on flood protection, for example, will save six euros in damage costs. It is important, therefore, that government authorities provide sufficient financing and adopt policies on climate adaptation.

In Belgium we see policies that have been introduced for various reasons. There are guidelines for workers who do physical work. In residential care homes there are inspections to ensure compliance with the heat plan. Finally, legislation is being introduced at various levels with requirements for new buildings in the areas of adaptation and sustainability. Nevertheless, there is no long-term vision on climate adaptation that combines care, decent work and quality jobs and climate change.





DECENT WORK AND QUALITY JOBS IN CARE



In contrast to personnel in other public services, care professionals cannot adjust their hourly schedules during a heat wave. They suffer because the work is physically intense and the work environment is usually not appropriate. Heat plans are effective at preventing excess deaths, but they mean extra work for staff. Everything is centred around care for

patients and residents. Even though the heat plans do contain guidelines for workers, there is often not enough time for these self-care activities, due to staff shortages. “When a heat plan is in place, we get an e-mail informing us that we should take more breaks. But without extra staff that is not possible,” says a care professional in a residential care home.

Care personnel are having to cope with the effects of climate change in a situation that is often already challenging. About 8.5 per cent of European professionals are employed in the care sector: that is 18.6 million people, the majority of whom are women. In most EU countries they face budget cuts and staff shortages. The Covid pandemic clearly shows that the care sector had been under-financed for several years, with shortages of personnel, beds, materials and equipment at the peak of the pandemic. With the increasing ageing of the population, the demand for care will continue to increase.

Staff burnout due to unsustainable work pressure is a big problem in the care sector.



We have to care for sick people, but the workers are getting sick themselves. Burnout is rising

rapidly. The pressure of work is too high: young people are working part-time because they can't handle a full-time job. You need to be completely fit, mentally and physically. And if you have been away for a while, you have to scramble to catch up with all the new developments. Things change fast here.

- Marijke Vindevoghel, trade union representative for ACV at UZ Gent.



The care sector is not an easy context to work in, and climate change is making the situation worse. It is important for workers to keep making their voices heard, including about climate. Together we can strive for solutions that guarantee decent work while also meeting the challenges of climate change.



Due to media attention and social pressure during the Covid pandemic, the trade union in Belgium has negotiated [wage increases](#) and [paid training](#) for a thousand new workers. The [Witte Woede](#) [White Anger] movement has been fighting for this for decades. “Witte Woede” is a label that journalists put on the struggle of non-profit employees in Flanders in the 1980s. The term refers to work clothes and is still used today.



GOOD EXAMPLES

In our search for solutions for climate adaptation, we must avoid making the existing problems worse. Work pressure and CO₂ emissions need to come down, not go up. The solutions should have positive effects on people and the environment.

UZ Gent has already been working on climate adaptation at several levels, for example the purchase of lighter clothing that is manufactured with people and the environment in mind. Water dispensers have been installed throughout the hospital so that staff can easily get a drink and plastic bottles are no longer needed.

The most progressive care facilities in terms of climate adaptation are the ones that have sustainability as part of their vision. In Flanders, care institutions are run and owned by different types of organisations: local authorities, non-profit organisations,

commercial institutions. Many not-for-profit organisations linked to civil society are active in the sector. In the absence of a timely strategy from government, they are working within their own strategy.



The strategic goals of our non-profit organisation are all measured against the Sustainable Development Goals.

We do of course have the advantage of not having to pay out dividends to our shareholders at the end of the year: we are a non-profit organisation, so all our profits are re-invested in the operation. Our buildings are constantly renovated to improve sustainability and invest in renewable energy."

- Johan Baert, financial manager of Group Ubuntu, a social network organisation for people with disabilities.



Another example of a sustainable solution is landscaping that leaves room for nature. More trees and other greenery in and around care homes are good for the environment and also for the well-being of patients and personnel. This is one example of preventive care. In Belgium only 2.2 per cent of the healthcare budget goes toward preventive care.

When the Flemish Agency for Nature and Forests launched the campaign '[Natuur in je Buurt](#)' [Nature in your neighbourhood], many hospitals conducted valuable experiments: for example, green spaces that patients, personnel and people in the surrounding areas can use, or waiting rooms in a natural setting.

Structural financial support is indispensable to scale up these experiments. Benno Geertsma of the Flemish network Natuur en Gezondheid [Nature and Health]:

“
Our partners in the green and care sectors are very keen to do more, but all support is temporary. The various ministers cannot agree, so the link between nature and health remains a blind spot.



- Benno Geertsma,
Natuur en Gezondheid

A number of voices in civil society are advocating for a thorough reshaping of our care model to improve sustainability. Ann Demeulemeester, for example, director of Flanders' largest homecare organisation Familiehulp [Family Help], advocates a policy based on collaboration in neighbourhoods. This would also reduce the distances that people drive – which would lead to less emissions.



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Today, we are already working on putting integrated care into practice; together with other homecare organisations we are implementing jointly organised evening and overnight care facilities.

- Ann Demeulemeester,
director of Familiehulp

Many good practices in the area of climate adaptation result from collaboration between various local services. A garden of a residential care home that is shared with the neighbourhood, disseminating knowledge about care innovation, allowing care personnel to use a public swimming pool free of charge during off-peak times these are simple initiatives that have a large effect!



WORKERS IN ACTION: WHAT CAN WE DO?

Employees can make a big difference in the workplace. They can use social consultations to draw the management's attention to things that could be improved or opportunities that are available. How do we prevent risks to health and safety? What skills and competencies need to be developed? How can we keep our work workable with quality jobs? And also: how can we reduce our own emissions to prevent further climate change?

Langoiroux: "In the 'well-being at work' working group we are discussing new ideas. We ask around, search the internet.... I work out the proposals and pass them on to the management. I show them examples and tell them how much it will cost."

In Belgium the Committee for Prevention and Protection in the Workplace (CPBW) is a good place for social consultation. Employees' representatives have the right to talk to their employers about safe, healthy and decent work. The theme of climate adaptation is certainly part of that.



The temperature in the kitchen of our campus in the city centre of Bruges was much too

high. As a union we brought that to the attention of the prevention service and asked: 'Would it not be a good idea to create a heat plan to manage that better in the future?' In 2019, a heat plan was then developed by the CPBW. Meanwhile, we have already had to action it several times.

- Emergency nurse Alexander Haesaert.

Marijke Vindevoghel: "As a union we have collective power. That is crucial in negotiations with the management. We should not stick our heads in the sand when it comes to climate."

Front runners: nurses' unions in North America

Ensuring that our workplaces are adapted to cope with climate change is important. Making sure problems do not get even worse by taking action to prevent further global warming is crucial. Today, therefore, various unions of healthcare personnel are taking the lead.

Since hurricane Sandy ravaged the United States and Canada in 2012, nurses' unions are taking a larger role in the North American climate movement, and they use clear language. [The New York State Nurses Association](#) directly addresses the energy companies. This sector continues to develop and burn fossil fuels. Burning fossil fuels is not only the main cause of CO₂ emissions; experts in care say it is also linked to diseases such as asthma, diabetes and cancer. "The cure for our energy system is the same cure we prescribe for our healthcare system: It's time to put people over profits!" the union states. It protests against pollution, works towards solutions to promote clean and democratic energy and safeguard jobs, and enters into partnerships to strive for climate justice.

In Canada, where fires, floods and heat waves are also frequent, the umbrella organisation [Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions](#) takes a leading role with respect to climate adaptation and the battle against climate change. In the report *Climate Change and Health: It's Time for Nurses to Act*, the federation calls on colleagues to reduce emissions in the care sector and in the community, to collectively put pressure on the federal government to achieve the goals of the Paris Accord and to prepare for the consequences of climate change. Extreme weather is mentioned, and so is the arrival of climate refugees – who have often taken huge risks to leave their country and are traumatised.

This battle begins small: by discussing it with colleagues and our union representatives.



Working from within the union, I do my best to improve awareness among

my colleagues. I want my grandchildren to still be able to live in a beautiful world.

- Ann Baetens, professional carer





CLIMATE ADAPTATION: TWELVE TIPS FOR WORKERS



If we want to prevent care personnel and care recipients experiencing serious problems due to climate change, employers and authorities and workers all need to make urgent and large-scale efforts to bring about

adaptations. Sustainability, decent work and quality care should go hand in hand. Unions are in a strong position to engage in dialogue about this. **What actions can we undertake?**

As a worker

For workers it is particularly important to be well informed. Be aware how climate change already influences your work, be aware of the further consequences of climate change that are coming and know that we need to adapt to limit these consequences. Concretely:

- 1. Talk with your colleagues about climate.** Raise their awareness of climate change and what it means for your jobs. Find out what your union is already doing about the climate. Feed information into that process too.
- 2. Know your rights as a worker in extreme weather conditions.** Do you have a right to extra breaks or cool drinks? Does your organisation have any climate adaptation policy and plans? Is it part of your organisation's occupational health and safety plans? Are they communicated by your union?
- 3. Bring ideas to the table.** All the good examples in this guide originated in the mind of a worker and were developed in consultation. What would make your work easier during a heat wave? What can your employer do to reduce CO₂ emissions? Can you collaborate on this with other care institutions or local services in your municipality?



As a union: raise awareness

Since climate change has a large impact on health and work in the care sector, it is important for unions in the care sector to take up climate as a theme. Unions must advocate for an active adaptation policy that includes both the unavoidable consequences of climate change today and reducing CO₂ emissions to prevent the problems from getting worse. For a start:

In Flanders, unions are working with the environmental movement and other social organisations via [Reset Vlaanderen](#) on Just Transition. The [Warme Dagen](#) [Hot Days] campaign makes many tips and campaign materials available for organisations to work on climate adaptation locally. Trade unions in the care sector have been on the streets for decades now as part of the Witte Woede [White Anger] movement; why not include White Anger in the coming climate demonstrations?

4. **As a union, be aware of the causes of climate change** and potential solutions to prevent further rises in temperature, especially when these have impacts on health. You can read the six main recommendations from scientists [here](#). Share good practices with union staff in other care institutions.
5. **Play a role in the climate movement.** Take inspiration from [the New York State Nurses Association](#). Seek out partnerships with organisations that work on the themes of climate and climate adaptation.
6. Do your colleagues and your employer know why you, as a union, are working to protect the climate? **Share your motivation via internal communication channels.** Search for others who can take action alongside you. The climate is a good topic to engage younger people.

Your union: in dialogue with the management

As a union, you should discuss the topic of climate with the management. Once again, providing information is crucial. Employers must be aware of the risks of the effects of climate change and what they can and should do to protect employees. Climate adaptation must go hand in hand with reducing CO₂ emissions and promoting decent work and quality care. As a union, ask yourself:

7. Is there a consultative body where discussion takes place about safe, healthy and/decent work? Raise climate adaptation as a topic for discussion here. All consequences of climate change pose risks to the well-being of personnel in the care sector. They all result in challenging weather conditions, greater work pressure and new situations. They increase the risk of absenteeism. Explain the connection with decent work and quality jobs when making demands for more personnel, better working conditions, support and training in the context of climate adaptation.

- 8.** Worldwide, healthcare is responsible for about 4.5 per cent of total CO₂ emissions. **Is your employer doing enough to counter further global warming?** As a union, support measures that are being taken and encourage further action.
- 9. Are there negotiations around changes in your organisation?** Put sustainability on the table as a criterion. Is there a need for new work clothing? Make sure it is comfortable in hot weather and produced in a sustainable way. Is the menu being reviewed? Choose less packaging and locally produced, plant-based foods. Are there renovations underway? Try to make them as climate neutral as possible; prevent flooding risks; ensure that there is a good infrastructure for cyclists and good connections with public transportation.

Advocacy by unions at a local, regional and national level

The union also has a role to play in putting pressure on different levels of governments to provide sufficient campaigns and resources for climate adaptation and against further climate change. The same can be done on a sectoral level: wage and working conditions are being negotiated in sectoral committees. The guide '[Adaptation to climate change and the labour market](#)' that the ETUC published in 2020 is useful in this respect. Think of the following campaigns:

10. Unions can call on governments and employers to map and evaluate **risks and opportunities related to climate change at the sectoral level**. This applies to employment opportunities, required skills and competencies, as well as risks to health and safety.
11. Based on the above, unions can appeal to government and employers to collaborate with them on drawing up **coherent and effective sectoral adaptation** strategies that ensure quality care and decent work in the future.

12. Worldwide, the Paris Climate Accord was adopted in 2015 to ensure that the increase in temperature does not exceed 1.5°C by the end of the century. Many countries are not on track to reach these goals. If we continue as we are now, according to, for example, [Climate Action Tracker](#), a rise in temperature of 3°C is more likely. We have to lend a hand – fast. **Urge your government to achieve the goals of the Paris Accord.**

Do you want to put climate adaptation on the agenda? Participate in the international campaign [Climate- and Employment-Proof Our Work](#) from the ITUC! Every year, on the worldwide action day, employees will be invited to initiate discussions with their employer or government about a safe and long-lasting future for their jobs and workplaces. Register and start that dialogue! #CEPOW



Links

Belgian's national ozone and heat plan: <https://www.warmedagen.be/voor-organisaties/warmteactieplan>

Page on climate change and health by the World Health Organization: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health>

Study: Evaluation of the Socio-Economic Impact of Climate Change in Belgium: <https://climat.be/doc/seclim-be-2020-finalreport.pdf>

Map of Flanders, showing the risk of flooding for vulnerable facilities: <https://klimaat.vmm.be/nl/kaartapplicatie-thema-2>

A Guide for Trade Unions - Adaptation to climate change and the world of work: https://www.etuc.org/sites/default/files/publication/file/2020-08/ETUC-adaptation-climate-guide_EN.pdf

Website Witte Woede ("White Anger"): www.wittewoede.be

Campaign 'Natuur in je Buurt': <https://www.natuurenbos.be/projectoproep-natuur-in-je-buurt>

Website New York State Nurses Association on Climate Change: <https://www.nysna.org/healthy-planet-healthy-communities-0#.YUM29J7SeLo>

Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions: <https://nursesunions.ca/>

"Six Critical Steps to Halt The Climate Crisis" according to scientists: <https://www.scientistswarning.org/six-steps/>

Reset.Vlaanderen: www.reset.vlaanderen

Warme dagen ('Hot Days')-campaign: www.warmedagen.be

Climate Action Tracker: <https://climateactiontracker.org/>

Campaign Climate and Employment Proof Our Work: <https://petitions.ituc-csi.org/cepow?lang=en>

Colophon

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