



Trade unions and the world of standardisation

Resolution adopted at the Executive Committee meeting of 26-27 March 2024

Technical standards also affect workers

Standard setting activities have existed for over 100 years. Industry needs technical standards for innovation and contractual agreements. The European institutions use [standards to shape the single market](#) of products and services. Courts refer to standards in judgements. Standards are part of [trade agreements](#), of the [EU-US TTC](#) dialogue, etc.

Circa 3600 [technical standards are referenced in the OJEU](#), underpinning legislative acts, such as the Machinery Regulation, the Personal Protective Equipment Regulation, the forthcoming AI Regulation, etc. As such, technical standards are essential for the safety of workers, in particular in the [OSH field](#) (e.g. ladders, hairdressers' gloves, cargo bikes, etc).

Traditionally, technical standards have been written for industry and by industry. But over the last decades, we have seen the economical focus move from an industry-based one to a service-based economy (e.g. servitisation of products). Also, standardisation bodies have adapted to this changing economy and now draft standards on Social Responsibility (EN [ISO 26000](#)), management systems (EN [ISO 9001](#), EN [ISO 45001](#)), services, [Artificial Intelligence](#) & Digitalisation, etc. These are all new standardisation fields in which, contrary to the past, workers' issues appear. These technical standards have the potential to conflict with the European Social model. Therefore, since 2015, the ETUC has been actively involved in standard setting processes and activities.

In line with the [ETUC Action programme 2023-2027](#), the ETUC opposes new standardisation initiatives which interfere with workers' and trade union matters and which are better addressed in collective agreements and legislation. However, when such standardisation work takes place despite our opposition, we influence the process and content to make sure that first they do not interfere with existing national and European legislation nor with ILO conventions, and to attempt to make them "worker friendly" and to ensure that the role and prerogatives of trade unions in social dialogue and collective bargaining is fully respected.

Technical standards are the benchmark for awarding certification labels. These certification labels are actively promoted (by certification bodies), to the detriment of social standards, in particular ILO fundamental labour conventions.



EU standardisation strategy and Regulation 1025/2012 on standardisation

On 2 February 2022, the European Commission published its [“EU standardisation strategy”](#). It was noted, amongst others, that “*more than ever standards do not only have to deal with technical components, but also incorporate core EU democratic values and interests, as well as green and social principles*”.

[Regulation 1025/2012](#) provides the EU legal framework around standardisation. This regulation also lays down the eligibility criteria for union financing (through which the ETUC receives annual EU/EFTA operating grants). In article 5, it “*encourages [the European Standardisation Organisations– i.e. CEN, CENELEC and ETSI] to facilitate an appropriate representation and effective participation of all relevant stakeholders*”. The National Standardisation Bodies (NSBs), i.e. the [members of CEN & CENELEC](#), also play a crucial role in the shaping of ISO standards. This results into an eco-system of National, European and International Standardisation bodies which are all working together. As such, the inclusiveness of the (European) standardisation system is largely dependent upon the participation of all interested stakeholders, including trade unions, at national level (e.g. within the mirror committee of the NSBs).

Evaluation of the Regulation 1025/2012 on standardisation, and next steps

In January 2024, the European Commission appointed a consortia to *evaluate* Regulation 1025/2012 on standardisation. The ETUC – as well as other stakeholders – will contribute to this evaluation. Based upon the outcome of the evaluation – expected for the second semester of 2024 – a (small targeted) revision might be initiated (or not).

Against this background and *subject to advancing insights in the next months*, following **potential improvements to Regulation 1025/2012 on standardisation are emphasised:**

- Change wording from “standards” to “technical standards”;
- Incorporate the term “trade unions” instead of “social interests” with a view to clarifying and protecting the role and the prerogatives of trade unions;
- Introduce the concept of “limit to standardisation”, in particular so that standards do not address social issues and fundamental rights;
- To review the adoption mechanisms of international standards over European standards (i.e. primacy principle of international standards), because standards developed at international level are not meant to be aligned with EU values and principles;
- Improve the efficiency of the current quality control system of “[HAS Consultants](#)” – managed by [EY](#) on behalf of the European Commission - for harmonised standards that are referenced in the OJEU, to underpin European legislation;
- Strengthen the participation rights of trade unions in the standardisation system (national, European, international), at no cost to trade unions.

Against this background, the **ETUC** will:

- Reinforce coordination between the ETUC and ITUC, in particular regarding International standardisation work (as international standards are transposed into European and subsequent national standards);
- Encourage dialogue between ILO and ISO with the aim to come to an ILO-ISO agreement, to limit/stop the elaboration of a growing collection of ISO



standards that deal with social/societal/ethical issues which are in the scope of ILO and trade unions;

- Actively contribute to the potential revision process of Regulation 1025/2012, through the ETUC Standardisation Committee.

Against this background, the ETUC will engage with the **affiliates**:

- To actively contribute to the public consultation (starting in March) on Regulation 1025/2012 on standardisation, in close collaboration with the ETUC Standardisation Committee;
- To support engagement with the respective national authorities, to obtain (financial) “support”, to become engaged in the standard setting activities;
- To help with their respective national authorities and national standardisation bodies, to bring awareness of the trade union position (e.g. chapter 3.8 of the ETUC action programme 2023-2027) in the “world of standardisation”;
- To continue to increase awareness and capacity on standardisation activities;
- To mobilise technical expertise in specific fields (e.g. Machinery, Artificial Intelligence, Personal Protective Equipment, Human Resource Management, etc.), eventually also directly sourcing this expertise at company level, with as aim to contribute to the content of specific technical standards at national and/or European level.