YouthProAktiv

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YouthProAktiv 2026 Youth Declaration on

a proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and the Council on improving and enforcing working conditions of trainees and combating regular employment relationships disguised as traineeships (‘*Traineeships Directive*’)

YouthProAktiv promotes proactivity and entrepreneurship in education and policy, while upholding the European Union's commitment to empowering all citizens equally in society and democratic life. As young Europeans, we believe that quality traineeships are a vital pathway to employment and professional development.

Yet traineeships must offer genuine learning, fair compensation, social protection, and dignity. Too many young people are engaged in unpaid or poorly-paid positions presented as training opportunities —arrangements that provide economic value to employers while limiting trainee access to social protection and career advancement.

The European Union is at a critical legislative moment. On March 20, 2024, the Commission proposed a Directive on improving and enforcing working conditions for trainees and combating regular employment relationships disguised as traineeships (Proposal for a Directive, COM(2024)132). The Council adopted its general approach on June 19, 2025, and the European Parliament endorsed its position in September 2025 (Council General Approach, 2025; Parliament Position, 2025). Negotiations between institutions are now underway, with trilogues ongoing as of May 2026.

The proposed Directive has raised legitimate concerns among businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The Commission's own proposal calls on Member States to assess the impact of transposition measures on SMEs to ensure they are not disproportionately affected (COM(2024)132), and European employer associations have warned that additional compliance requirements could discourage SMEs from offering traineeships altogether (SMEunited, 2025; BusinessEurope, 2024).

These concerns are valid. Many traineeships, particularly those embedded in educational programmes, involve young people with limited professional experience who require significant investment in supervision and training before they can contribute to an organisation's work. For smaller enterprises, this represents a real cost that cannot be absorbed without support.

Currently, 3.7 million young people undertake a traineeship each year across the EU (European Court of Auditors, 2024), with 78% of 15 to 34-year-olds completing at least one traineeship at some point (Eurobarometer, 2023). Yet nearly half receive no financial compensation, 39% lack social protection, and many face barriers to access based on gender, disability, or socioeconomic background (EPRS Briefing, 2024).

This legislative moment is critical: the Directive now in negotiation offers a meaningful opportunity to establish minimum standards that protect young people

and ensure traineeships serve their stated purpose as genuine pathways to quality employment. Without action, current inequalities and gaps in protection will persist.

Young trainees across Europe are asserting five non-negotiable rights as minimum standards necessary to ensure that traineeships serve their stated purpose: enabling young people to gain skills, contribute their labour fairly, and transition into sustainable careers. Each right addresses a distinct challenge in the current system and reflects what evidence, research, and young people themselves identify as essential.

I. **The Right to Fair Compensation**. Young trainees must receive fair compensation for work that generates economic value for employers. Currently, 45% of trainees in the EU receive no payment (EPRS, 2024), creating conditions where only young people with family financial support can afford to train. This practice limits access to traineeships for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.
Fair compensation must reflect the cost of living and, where trainees perform work equivalent to employees, must respect minimum wage standards (Industrial Law Journal, 2024). Compensation recognises that young people's labour has value and that trainees deserve to sustain themselves while learning.

II. The right to genuine learning and skill development. Traineeships must involve meaningful learning with clear training objectives and structured skill development. The current system often lacks clarity about whether traineeships are learning experiences or employment arrangements, creating uncertainty about trainee status and protections. Genuine traineeships must include structured supervision, mentorship, learning plans, and transparent assessment of skills acquired (Helme, Industrial Law Journal, 2024). They must be time-limited —typically around six months— to prevent indefinite arrangements disguised as ongoing training. When traineeships include genuine learning outcomes, they become effective entry pathways into sustainable careers.

III. The right to social protection and safety. Young trainees must have access to social protection including health insurance, occupational safety measures, and protection from harassment and discrimination. Currently, 39% of EU trainees lack any social protection coverage (EPRS, 2024). Additionally, evidence indicates that female trainees experience higher rates of workplace harassment compared to employees with formal protections (Helme, Industrial Law Journal, 2024). Social protection and safety are fundamental rights. Young people must be covered by occupational health and safety standards, have access to healthcare, and have effective channels to report concerns without fear of retaliation. These protections ensure traineeships support rather than undermine young people's wellbeing.

IV. The right to non-discrimination. Every young person deserves equal access to quality traineeships regardless of gender, disability, migrant status, socioeconomic background, or other protected characteristics. Current evidence shows disparities in traineeship access and conditions across demographic groups (European Parliament, 2025; EPRS, 2024). The Directive must establish clear anti-discrimination protections and require employers to actively foster inclusive recruitment and working environments. Equal access to traineeships is essential to breaking cycles of inequality that begin at career entry.

V. The right to voice, accountability, and justice. Young trainees must be able to raise concerns about their working conditions and rights without fear of retaliation, and violations must be addressed through effective enforcement. Currently, many trainees lack awareness of their rights and have limited channels to report concerns safely. The Directive must establish independent reporting mechanisms, protect those who report violations, support labour inspectorates in investigating concerns, and ensure meaningful enforcement. Young people also need access to support and collective representation through relevant organisations. Without accountability and enforcement, rights remain theoretical rather than substantive.

Bridging the gap: publicly-funded employability programmes as the shared solution

Protecting trainee rights and supporting employers are not opposing goals. The solution lies in publicly-funded employability programmes that prepare young people for the workplace and subsidise the costs of quality traineeships, so that neither the trainee nor the enterprise bears the full financial burden. The EU and its Member States already have the infrastructure to deliver this. Existing programmes demonstrate that quality work-based learning can operate at scale without placing disproportionate costs on enterprises or young people:

1. The Reinforced Youth Guarantee commits all Member States to offering every young person under 30 a quality opportunity within four months of becoming unemployed or leaving education. Since 2013, the scheme has supported over 63 million young people, backed by financing under NextGenerationEU and the European Social Fund Plus (Council Recommendation, 2020).
2. The ALMA initiative (Aim, Learn, Master, Achieve) as part of the ESF+, provides supervised work placements of two to six months in another EU Member State for the most disadvantaged young NEETs, covering all participant costs including travel, insurance, social security, accommodation, and coaching (European Commission, 2022).
3. Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs pairs aspiring entrepreneurs with experienced SME owners in another country for one to six months, with the EU covering travel and subsistence. By 2024, the programme had facilitated nearly 12,000 exchanges across 45 countries (European Commission, 2024).
4. The VET strand of Erasmus+, within a programme budget of 26.2 billion euros for 2021-2027, enables work-based learning placements that connect education systems directly with employer needs.

At the national level, programmes such as Spain's Talento Joven) combine vocational guidance, training in high-demand sectors, and structured internship placements, with costs borne by public institutions rather than by the host enterprise (Spanish Chamber of Commerce, 2023). Similar schemes exist across Member States, many co-financed through the ESF+.

When young people arrive at a traineeship better prepared and with publicly-funded support, enterprises gain motivated contributors and future employees. Scaling these programmes is essential to making the Directive's standards achievable for employers of all sizes.

To realise the five above mentioned rights, immediate and coordinated action is necessary at all levels.

At the European level, we call on EU institutions to:

1. Adopt a Directive that establishes clear, consistent standards on fair compensation, social protection, learning outcomes, and non-discrimination across all traineeship arrangements outside formal education.
2. Ensure enforcement mechanisms are robust, including adequate labour inspection capacity, accessible reporting channels, and proportionate penalties for violations.
3. Require regular monitoring of traineeship conditions and demographic access across Member States, using data to identify and address persistent gaps and inequalities.
4. Support youth representation in implementation and governance of the Directive, ensuring young people's voices inform how protections are developed and enforced.
5. Scale and strengthen publicly-funded employability programmes, including the Reinforced Youth Guarantee, ALMA, Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs, and the VET strand of Erasmus+, ensuring they reach young people in all Member States and provide adequate support for host enterprises, particularly SMEs.
6. Develop targeted financial support mechanisms, including through the European Social Fund Plus, to help SMEs meet the Directive's standards on compensation, social protection, and structured learning without bearing disproportionate costs.

At the national level, we call on Member States to:

1. Implement the Directive with clarity and consistency, translating all provisions into national law and ensuring alignment with existing employment and education regulations.
2. Strengthen labour inspection capacity with adequate funding and expertise to monitor traineeship arrangements and investigate concerns.
3. Establish clear national definitions of traineeships that prevent misclassification of regular employment as training, with transparent criteria for assessment.
4. Guarantee access to support for trainees, including legal guidance and representation, to understand rights and address violations.
5. Fund youth organisations and civil society groups that support trainees in understanding their rights and reporting concerns.
6. Monitor the use of traineeships to ensure they support rather than replace permanent job creation.
7. Expand national employability programmes that combine vocational guidance, pre-professional training, and subsidised traineeship placements, drawing on models such as ALMA, *Talento Joven* and equivalent schemes co-financed through the ESF+, to ensure young people enter traineeships with relevant skills and that host enterprises receive adequate public support.

At the local and institutional level, we call on employers, civil society, and public institutions to:

1. Design traineeships with clear learning objectives, structured supervision and mentorship, and transparent assessment of skills development.
2. Ensure traineeship arrangements offer fair compensation, recognising that investment in fair conditions supports workforce quality and productivity.
3. Create inclusive working environments where all trainees are treated with dignity, harassment and discrimination are actively prevented, and concerns can be reported safely.
4. Support workers' representatives and youth organisations in providing guidance to trainees about their rights and available support.
5. Provide transparency to labour authorities regarding traineeship numbers, duration, compensation, and working conditions.
6. Engage with publicly-funded employability programmes, including Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs and national Youth Guarantee schemes, to access young talent with relevant preparation and to benefit from public co-financing of traineeship costs.

We, the youth of Europe, are asserting these rights as workers and citizens. We contribute economic value through our work and deserve recognition and protection in return.

The Directive currently in negotiation can establish meaningful standards that ensure quality traineeships and protect young people, or it can leave significant gaps in protection. We urge policymakers to prioritise the rights and wellbeing of young people in reaching a final agreement. The decisions taken now will shape the experiences and opportunities of millions of young Europeans for years to come.

We call on the European Parliament, the Council, the Commission, and all Member States to deliver a Directive that reflects the rights and dignity of young Europeans.