

## Working Conditions around the World



### Warm-up:

- What do you think working conditions are like in your country?
- What is the minimum wage in your country? Do you think it's reasonable?
- How much sick leave do workers in your country get?
- How much parental leave do workers in your country get?
- Is maternity leave longer than paternity leave in your country?
- Do you think unions are powerful or weak in your country?
- Is there anything you would change about working conditions in your country?



### 1. Pairwork: read the statements below and guess if they are true or false before reading the article on the next page.

- Sick leave in Germany can last for more than 1 year. **T** / F
- Workers in Australia are entitled to 10 days of paid sick leave per year. **T** / F
- The minimum wage in China changes from province to province. **T** / F
- The cost of living in Germany is higher than in the USA. T / **F**
- The USA has a law requiring employers to provide paid annual leave. T / **F**
- Employees in Mexico receive at least 12 days of annual leave after their first year. **T** / F
- The minimum wage in Mexico is higher than the minimum wage in China. T / **F**



## 2. Read the descriptions of working conditions in different countries.

### Germany

The minimum wage in Germany is about \$15.80 per hour, and the average cost of living is around \$1,250–\$1,500 per month (without rent). Workers who take sick leave usually receive 100% of their salary for the first 6 weeks of illness. After this period, employees with public health insurance normally receive around 70% of their gross salary from their health insurance. This payment can continue for up to 78 weeks for the same illness. Parents can take up to 3 years of parental leave for each child. Government parental benefit is normally paid for 12 months, or 14 months if both parents share the leave. The legal minimum annual leave is 20 days for employees working five days a week, although many workers receive 25–30 days.

### China

The minimum wage in China varies between provinces and cities. In Beijing, it is about \$3.60 per hour, while the average cost of living is around \$650 per month (without rent). Chinese workers can receive paid sick leave, but the amount they receive depends on their length of service and local rules. New mothers are generally entitled to at least 98 days of maternity leave. Annual leave starts at 5 days for employees who have worked for at least one year, and can increase with longer service.

### Australia

The Australian minimum wage is about \$15.80 per hour, and the average cost of living is approximately \$1,100 per month (without rent). Full-time and part-time workers are generally entitled to 10 days of paid sick leave per year. Parents can receive up to 24 weeks of government-paid parental leave, paid at the national minimum wage, with additional leave available under certain conditions. Employees can also take up to 12 months of unpaid parental leave. Annual leave is generally 20 days.

### USA

The federal minimum wage in the USA is \$7.25 per hour, although many states have higher minimum wages. The average cost of living is around \$1,000 per month (without rent). There is no federal law requiring paid sick leave, although many states and cities have their own rules. Eligible workers can take up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected parental leave under federal law. Annual paid leave is also not required by federal law, although many companies offer paid vacation to their employees.

### Mexico

The minimum wage in Mexico is about \$2.20 per hour, although it is higher in some areas. The average cost of living is around \$750 per month (without rent). Workers who are unable to work because of illness can receive 60% of their salary from social security after the first few days, depending on the type of illness. Mothers are generally entitled to 12 weeks of paid maternity leave, while fathers receive paid leave after the birth of a child. Annual leave starts at 12 working days after the first year of employment.



### 3. Pairwork: ask and answer these questions.

- What did you find most surprising about the information above?
- How many questions from exercise 2 did you get right?
- From an employer's perspective, which country would you prefer to open a business in and why?
- From an employee's perspective, which country would you prefer to live in and why?



### 4. You are going to roleplay a situation in which you negotiate the working conditions in your country or company. First use the negotiating phrases in the box below to complete the conversation.

|              |                       |                     |
|--------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| have in mind | how about             | out of the question |
| reasonable   | on the condition that | meet in the middle  |

George: Minimum wage of 17 euros an hour? That's *out of the question*, most businesses would go bankrupt within a year.

Helena: Ok, what did you *have in mind*?

George: We think 12 euros an hour is *reasonable*. At that rate employees could live comfortably, and businesses would still have a chance.

Helena: I'm sorry but that is simply too low. Couldn't we *meet in the middle* at 15 euros an hour?

George: That's not the middle and you know it Helena. Look, we could agree to 15 euros an hour *on the condition that* we reduce sick leave from 15 days to 10 days a year.

Helena: I'm afraid I can't agree to that.... But *how about* if we keep the sick leave at 15 days but reduced the pay to 80% of the employee's salary?

George: That might work actually...





**5. Negotiation:** Student A will represent the unions (workers), student B will represent the lobbyists (companies). Read the cards below.

*\*Note: Feel free to offer creative solutions. E.g. "We can agree to 25 days of annual leave on the condition that the employee has worked at the company for at least a year."*

**Student A:** Negotiate the best possible working conditions for the workers. In the boxes below write down what your target is for each figure, and what your lowest possible number is (eg. lowest minimum wage \$8, target minimum wage \$15).

|                | Lowest possible number | Target |
|----------------|------------------------|--------|
| Minimum wage:  |                        |        |
| Annual leave   |                        |        |
| Sick leave     |                        |        |
| Parental leave |                        |        |

**Student B:** Negotiate the best possible conditions for businesses in your country. In the boxes below write down what your target is for each figure, and what your highest possible number is (e.g. highest minimum wage \$13, target minimum wage \$6).

|                | Highest possible number | Target |
|----------------|-------------------------|--------|
| Minimum wage:  |                         |        |
| Annual leave   |                         |        |
| Sick leave     |                         |        |
| Parental leave |                         |        |



**6. Optional task/homework:** Choose a country that interests you. Research the working conditions in that country and then present what you found to the class. Your presentation should include the minimum wage, annual leave, sick leave, and parental leave.