

## **Sectoral negotiations for metal and technology in Belgium failed**

In Belgium, wage negotiations are rather strongly framed by legislation.

In almost all sectors, a system of automatic linking of wages to inflation has been in place for many decades. Almost all these schemes are included in sectoral collective labour agreements, the modalities of which are, however, sectorally different (periodicity, calculation method, scope, etc.).

On the other hand, there was an intervention from politics about 30 years ago. At the end, the automatic linking of wages to inflation with "free wage negotiations" on top of that had led to a development of wage costs that put our country at an increasing competitive disadvantage. This political decision was converted into the Competitiveness Act of 1996. This law stipulates that wages and wage costs may not increase more than those of our three most important trading partners, namely France, Germany and the Netherlands. In this way, a wage norm was set, the height of which is determined every two years by the interprofessional social partners, if not by the government. This law, which was also gradually tightened up, kept wage cost competitiveness in check on the one hand, but on the other the automatic increases took an increasing bite of the "available" wage margin for wage negotiations. As a result, for some years now, the scope for wage negotiations has been limited or even virtually non-existent.

For the period 2025-2026, the interprofessional social partners have not reached an agreement to set the level of the wage norm. This put the ball in the government's court. Due to the late installation of a new government, the final decision on this has not been made until the late summer of 2025. The government finally set the wage standard at 0%, but with the compromise of raising the legal limit for meal vouchers. Meal vouchers are agreed in collective bargaining agreements at sector level (which is rare) or at company level, or in individual agreements.

As a result, the focus of the sectoral negotiations was largely on the increase of meal vouchers whether or not. And due to the late political decision, these negotiations did not take place until late in the autumn of 2025.

For the metal and technology sector, the positions of employers and trade unions were very different. For Agoria, meal vouchers are a theme that must be agreed a priori at company level. The trade unions, on the other hand, wanted to make a sectoral agreement so that almost every employee would receive an increase in meal vouchers. In the negotiations, a formula of a sectoral agreement was sought, but with the possibility of opt-out for the companies. However, after a few rounds of negotiations at the end of 2025 and the beginning of 2026, it became clear that no compromise could be found. Other topics were also discussed during the discussions, such as career leave and commuting interventions, but an agreement on this without an agreement on meal vouchers was also not possible.

The sectoral negotiations have thus broken down, shifting to the company level.