

EPSU Confronts Enlargement Challenge

The **European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU)** welcomes the ten new European Union (EU) members into the European Union (EU) in a spirit of solidarity. It also believes that the common good of both old and new member states will only be served by ensuring that the European Social Model is enhanced rather than diminished by this historic enlargement.

A multitude of issues is identified by **Resolution: R5 Public Services in an Enlarged European Union (EU)** which will be tabled at the 7th EPSU Congress in Stockholm on 14-17 June. Potentially this could outline EPSU's position for the coming four year Congress period.

Enlargement is welcomed as an opportunity "to further build peace, stability and prosperity in Europe." However, the point is firmly made that "The enlarged European Union (EU) cannot just be an enlarged internal market." According to the EPSU document this would be fatal for social justice and economic and social cohesion. The document examines such pressing issues as privatisation and the role of global institutions in agenda setting the new member state's economic and social structures.

Reform of public administrative structures is an issue to which the potential EPSU position gives high priority, as are decentralisation and administrative capacity. The weak trade union infrastructure and culture evident in central and Eastern Europe, and its exploitation by unscrupulous employers, is another pressing concern. Addressing this, the Congress document succinctly outlines a focussed work-plan.

EPSU General Secretary Carola Fischbach-Pyttel, referring to how the trade union body would respond to the EU's biggest single expansion said, "Enlargement invokes both solidarity and tremendous challenges. The crude and opportunistic foisting of neo-liberal economics in the new member states must be countered. Trade union bodies like ours must advance imaginative proposals for reformed and revitalised public sectors and at the same time, revitalise our own organisations, structures and practises."

The Congress document is explicit about how these ambitious objectives are to be achieved, saying "Effective instruments are required to manage continuous change and adaptation within the enlarged EU combining values of economic efficiency with solidarity within a social market economy and democracy in all spheres of society, including the world of work, recognising the responsibilities of social partners."

This, in practise, is a demand for undiminished trade union rights and full input into political and civil society along with the full ambit of economic, social and democratic good practise. This, it says, is about "adequate instruments" and the effective practical implementation of the EU's social acquis." Such action is seen as an effective counterweight to the potential negative side-effects of free movement such as social dumping and brain-drain scenarios.

The privatisation and concentration of ownership seen in the utility sector, for example, and the activities of the World Bank and others, who are cultivating a privatisation agenda in health and other key public sectors, causes alarm. While the transformation of public administrations remains a “work in progress”, as far as the EPSU document is concerned.

The alternative envisaged is “the advance of the European social model, based on high quality public services, strong unions and vibrant social dialogue and collective bargaining”. Linking into Public Service International’s campaign on quality public services, entailing “positive public service reform” forms part of this process. Implicit in this will be ardent promotion of a collective bargaining culture and creating the optimum conditions for proper social dialogue.

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