



**Basic Points for an EPSU position  
on developments in the European Waste Sector**

**Final document as adopted by the Executive Committee, 25-26/05/1998**

## **Basic Points for an EPSU position on developments in the European Waste Sector**

### **Introduction**

Developments in the European Waste Management and Environmental Services sector give rise to the need for EPSU to develop basic points of policy.

Trends, issues, legislation and more and more employers are alike for EPSU affiliates. There are similar problems and challenges for the unions and their members. Several hundred thousands of workers are active in a sector which becomes rapidly European in outlook.

EPSU organises workers in public and private waste companies. Waste management and environmental services (including waste water treatment) are considered a growth industry. The European Commission, (Employment in Europe 1995), predicts that between 1995-2000 an additional 250,000 environmental jobs will be created across the European Union.

The policy points are based on discussions during a meeting in Berlin (September 1997) and in Brussels (December 1997, April 1998) as well as a background study on *Municipal Waste Management Industry in Europe: Issues, Trends and Multinationals* (PSPRU for EPSU, published January 1998). A separate paper on *Multinational Strategies and Waste Industry Trends, their implications for Trade Union Strategy and Practice* is developed. More detailed background material is available on the energy, water and local government sectors. Profiles of TNCs active in the sector are also on the database. General policies are developed in the PSI policy paper on Waste (1993).

### **European Waste Policy**

- EPSU agrees with the hierarchy of principles in the Commission Waste Strategy:
  - ⇒ An appropriate strategy is based on prevention of waste. Waste should be pushed back to the producer;
  - ⇒ The second priority is recycling of wastes. First of all to recover materials. When that is not possible, waste can be incinerated to recover the energy. Sorting and recycling of waste has a large job potential;
  - ⇒ If these are not possible, than the safe disposal of waste can be considered.

The implementation of this strategy is to be guided by considering the best environmental solution taking account of economic and social costs;

The political focus and the instruments to actually carry the principles through should be fundamentally strengthened through:

- Reduction of the role of the market in the controlling of the waste-sector. It is a catastrophe that waste is considered as a merchandise. Privatisation, cut-throat competition and monopolisation in the sector is destroying possibilities for local, national as well as international initiatives to control waste-production, -transportation, and -disposal. The working environment is jeopardised in this situation as well. The reasonable wish of European citizens to have better control of waste, should be supported by giving more competence to local and national authorities in the field to cope with waste-producers and operators.
- Increased environmental requirements and instruments for control in the waste sector should be carried through jointly in the European Union. This should include:
  - ⇒ Requirements to minimalise environmentally hazardous substances in products and to ensure the recyclability of products;
  - ⇒ Demands for certified environment- and quality control-systems, including training of staff in all parts of the waste-sector;

- ⇒ Specific guidelines for the safety and health of workers in the sector;
- ⇒ Economic instruments to direct the waste-flows;
- ⇒ Requirements of green accounting in the sector;
- ⇒ Demands for environmental and working environmental quality of waste-operators in public tenders.
- Sorting of waste in single fractions should happen as far as possible at source. This should be followed by separate collection and disposal. Only then is it known what the wastes are. This is important both from an environmental as well as from an health and safety perspective.
- As privatisation of waste services has implications for the quality of the service, the possibilities for democratic control and accountability over the private companies (especially TNCs), jobs and working conditions, EPSU prefers public ownership.
- A system of concessions operates in several European countries. EPSU believes concessions are to be governed by democratic regulations including the right to know of citizens and the right to participate in the regulation (the right to use the information).
- Privatisation and concessions should not mean that public authorities do no longer invest in the waste management sector. The need for public investment remains strong.
- The urge to maximalise profits is strong and will push private companies to circumvent rules and regulations to seek the cheapest options. Public regulations and public control and monitoring needs to be strong so the market does not dictate the direction of waste policies.
- EPSU considers that there should be harmonisation of regulation in the EU (at a high level) to prevent the dumping of waste. Common rules need to be defined for the private and public sector to prevent competition and to prevent downward pressure to lowest standards.
- EPSU notes that a strong concentration process is taking place in the waste sector leaving few companies in the market. The concentration process is based on cut throat competition leading to social dumping and undermining of social standards.
- EPSU believes there is a role for public waste companies providing high quality services. Inter-municipal companies combing services for several municipalities are one way to ensure efficient and effective services.
- EPSU wants that public authorities which award contracts and concessions to private companies for waste management services lay down quality standards in the tenders. These quality standards are to include respect of collective agreements in the country of operation. Otherwise cross-border operations and posting of workers lead to undermining of a social Europe.
- Investments made by the EBRD or World Bank in the waste sector in Central and Eastern European countries should have social and environmental conditions attached which will contribute to high standards in the sector.

### **A Social Europe in the Waste Sector**

The fierce competition in the waste sector leads to downward pressures on social standards. To prevent a breakdown of these standards a Social Europe in the waste sector is imperative. It means:

- ⇒ Respect for labour regulations and collective agreements. This will prevent price dumping based on wage dumping;
- ⇒ Respect for trade union rights. European waste sector unions will support one another in case of grave violations of these rights;
- ⇒ Employment creation. Also the waste sector should make an effort to contribute to and develop the Guidelines on Employment of the European Union. EPSU notes that vocational education and training for new qualifications and skills is a priority leading to mutual recognition of qualifications and skills in the EU;

- ⇒ High quality working conditions. This will contribute to a better image for the sector. A priority is the development of a European health and safety policy laying down minimum standards and aspiring to the best standards available;
- ⇒ Establishment of European Works Councils in the waste transnational companies. Several companies have a European Works Councils such as WMX, Generale des Eaux, Lyonnaise des Eaux. EPSU is to co-ordinate a waste sector specific input in these councils with unions concerned. A priority issue concerns the health and safety policy;
- ⇒ Development of a European social dialogue with the appropriate employers.

### **Health and Safety Policy**

EPSU believes that high health and safety standards in the industry are a guarantee for respect for environmental regulations. To that end the following are important:

- ⇒ Wastes that create a risk for the health and safety of workers, are a risk to the health of the population and to the environment even though there can be differences as to the impact of categories of wastes on workers, citizens, the environment (eg. toxic, micro-biological, clinical wastes).
- ⇒ The general rule for an effective health and safety policy is that workers should not touch the wastes.
- ⇒ Health and safety considerations need to be taken into account during all stages of the waste management process (collection, transport, disposal). These considerations are important with regard to work organisation, machines, equipment etc.
- ⇒ Companies need to ensure training on health and safety. There is a need for transparency on investments in health and safety.
- ⇒ Health and Safety Clauses in the European Works Council Agreements with waste management companies. The clause developed by the TGWU (UK) can serve as a model.
- ⇒ Training and Health and Safety issues should be among the issues discussed in a European social dialogue.

Areas for further general work for EPSU:

- to continue research on the developments in the waste sector and with regard to the activities of transnational companies in particular;
- to create contacts with the European Commission and European Parliament;
- to develop a paper on a European trade union strategy;
- to establish contacts with possible European employers organisations;
- to explore the possibilities for a guide of best practice;
- to contribute to a better flow of information between the trade unions in the sector concerning developments of importance to them. A waste sector news letter is one means to support that based on reports of the unions.

Areas for further work on health and safety issues include:

- The collection, handling, transport, and disposal of clinical waste This concerns also colleagues working in health services;
- Manual handling of loads (lifting);
- Hazards involved in the sorting and recycling of waste;
- EPSU will explore possibilities for concrete projects ETUC's Trade Union Technical Bureau (TUTB);
- Discuss the health and safety clause with the appropriate European Works Councils.

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