

EPSU* statement to EU Justice Council on 26-27 April 2012

Better Prisons for Staff, Prisoners and Society Effects of austerity on prisons are like salt on an open wound

The EPSU prisons services network, representing a majority of people working with offenders in Europe, held its annual meeting on 12-13 April 2012 in Oslo, Norway. After nearly 4 years of austerity measures, shrinking economy and rising unemployment, the longstanding problems facing many EU prison systems remain:

- prison overcrowding
- Increasing prison population, from 549 399 in 1998 to 630 000 inmates in 2009¹, and of the prison population rate per 100,000 inhabitants of +24% between 2001-2009²
- longer sentencing regimes
- Increasing use of pre-trial detention, on average, 1 out of 5 prisoners
- Violations of prisoners' most basic rights
- Understaffing across all services dealing with offenders
- inadequate or insufficient training of prison staff and managers
- Lack of effective support from governments and politicians

These are well-known and help explain why in many countries the prison system causes recidivism and fails to rehabilitate offenders. Yet little is done to prevent these problems that put at risk the safety of prison employees, offenders and society at large. They also prevent the implementation of the European Prison Rules, agreed by all EU and EEA governments, which EPSU strongly promotes.

Serious crime should invariably lead to imprisonment. However prison is also increasingly used as a place to hold the mentally ill, drug addicts, the homeless, and, more recently, foreign nationals and undocumented migrants. This violates the key principle of the European Prison Rules whereby the deprivation of liberty should be a last resort alternative when other forms of punishment cannot guarantee the security of individuals or society. It makes the work of prison staff much more complex and demanding, yet it remains undervalued.

The EU-coordinated austerity measures and its serial cuts in public service jobs, wages, pensions and other attacks of the welfare state in most EU member states are aggravating the twin problem of understaffing and prison overcrowding. They come at a time when more resources are needed to support offenders' rehabilitation that also require safe working conditions and decent pay for prison staff. It is the strong view of EPSU that the cost of prison systems must never justify degrading and dangerous detention conditions of inmates and working conditions of staff.

¹ Eurostat, 2009, increasing prison population in 19 EU member states, excluding administrative detention

² Council of Europe, SPACE, increasing prison population rate in 19 EU member states.

The EPSU prison network discussed the issues of working time and training. In many countries staff are increasingly pressured into overtime to the extent that “time debt” has become a central concern. This is the result of growing workload due to shortage of personnel or too low pay level or both. Long working hours are threatening the health and safety of workers. As EU social partners are currently revising the 1993 working time directive, the EPSU prison network hopes that viable solutions will be found to a long working hours’ culture, which compromises the safety of both the personnel and inmates.

Dealing with offenders requires very complex skills but the lack of resources and/or workload prevent staff from taking on the necessary regular training. This applies not only to staff but also to management at all levels. Poor leadership and management have disastrous consequences for carrying out good work, causing high levels of stress amongst staff with resulting ill health and high sickness rates. Human and financial resources are wasted and pride in professional work becomes impossible.

At the time of the meeting, the EPSU prison services network was much saddened by the hunger strike of 11 Greek prison trade union officers (7-12 April) to protest against the lethal combination of prison overcrowding and understaffing and 3 years of unpaid overtime in addition to public sector pay cuts. Last May, the EPSU prison network raised the alarm bell following a visit to the Karydallos prison, to our great concern we are yet to see resolution of these harrowing issues.

In view of the persistent crisis in prisons, the EPSU prison services network urges the EU Justice Ministers Council who are meeting on 26 and 27 April to support:

- imprisonment as a last resort punishment;
- enforcement of the European Prison Rules and follow-up to the recommendations of the Council of Europe’s 16th conference of directors of prisons (October 2011) to reduce prison population, including, amongst others, reducing pre-trial detention and better prepared conditional release;
- enforcement, as a bare minimum, of EU social standards on health and safety and working time in the prison system;
- drawing up of EU common principles on training of prison staff and management in cooperation with the EPSU prison service network;
- compliance with trade union rights and social dialogue in line with the EU Treaty articles 152-155, EU charter of fundamental rights, ILO conventions 151, and European prison rules 86-87 that promote consultation with staff, as well as with detainees, by management;
- cooperation between prison inspectors and trade unions with a view to take due account of staff working conditions and work environment;
- more resources for all public services dealing with offenders to ensure the rehabilitation of offenders, safety of staff and security of society at large;
- building upon good practices across Europe in cooperation with trade unions and prison staff whose expertise is much valuable, yet often neglected.

Given the already critical situation in many European prisons, austerity will be like pouring salt on an open wound. The above must therefore be underpinned by an immediate moratorium on cuts in public service jobs and pay which are socially disastrous and economically unsound.

Higher crime levels and other long term social problems are a high price to pay for the reduction in public debt and deficit levels. The best way to reduce crime is to prevent it from occurring through investment in social inclusion, education, decent job opportunities and avoid criminalisation of groups of people who are not dangerous but made vulnerable.

There are alternatives to spending cuts, most urgently the adoption of the EU directive for a tax on financial transactions, that can raise €57 Billion per year, and of effective measures against tax fraud and avoidance estimated at €1Trillion per year in the EU.

** **EPSU** is the **European Federation of Public Service Unions**. It is the largest federation of the ETUC with 8 million public service workers from over 275 trade unions employed in the energy, water and waste sectors, health and social services, local, regional and central government and EU administrations in all European countries. For more information about EPSU www.epsu.org*