

Care workers in action - demanding respect and decent pay



(15 March 2018) Today thousands of care workers across France have been taking strike action in the eldercare sector. This is the second day of industrial action in two months as unions push for more staff, increased funding for the sector and improved pay and career prospects for workers.

But it is not only French trade unions that have been mobilising and negotiating for care workers since the beginning of the year. EPSU affiliates in Ireland, Spain, Austria, Denmark and the UK have also been active, trying to improve pay and conditions for their members and the quality of the services they provide.

Common themes, apart from better pay for the predominantly female workforce, have been precarious employment conditions, staffing levels and working time, including the often low number of weekly hours and split shifts.

EPSU general secretary Jan Willem Goudriaan said: “We fully support the

courageous carers, mostly women who demand respect and decent pay for their work. Public investment in our care services is urgently needed so carers can deliver the quality care our elderly, sick and children deserve. Standing up for care workers means addressing the gender pay gap, precariousness and low pay.”

France: massive mobilisations in elder care

The actions in France have been in the residential care sector (EHPAD). The strike action on 30 January was called by eight trade unions and very well supported but by 15 March two further trade unions joined the action. The unions also secured backing from service users and their families as well as an association of directors of eldercare establishments.

The government response to the January action was to offer an extra EUR 50 million funding but the trade unions rejected this saying that this was completely inadequate to address the urgent staffing needs and the claims for better pay and career prospects that would begin to recognise the workloads and responsibilities of elder care workers.

Spain: home care workers continue mobilisation

Home care workers in the Basque region of northern Spain are in the fourth month of their campaign to secure better pay and employment conditions. Their latest partial work stoppage took place on 27 February following actions earlier in the month and at the end of January. The unions have been targeting on city councils and the regional council to act on the low pay and precarious employment conditions that are common to the contracts run by private companies across the region.

Austria: boost for lower paid in private health and social care deal

After six rounds of negotiations, the vda and GPA-djp service unions agreed a deal for 100000 workers in the private health and social care sector. There is a 2.5% pay increase from 1 February but the EUR 48 per month minimum increase will mean more than 3% for the lowest paid workers. Specific occupations, including care assistants, special care assistants and qualified nurses, will get additional increases ranging from EUR 10 to EUR 50 a month in both 2018 and 2019. The two unions had been actively mobilising to support their negotiations, organising warning strikes involving over 40000 workers in more than 140 private health and social care

institutions on 15 and 16 February.

Earlier in the year the unions also negotiated a 3% increase in the sector minimum wage for private childcare workers from 1 January. The increase took the lowest wage level above EUR 1500 for the first time, reaching EUR 1514. The unions are pleased that this is a good deal for the 10000 workers in the sector, the vast majority of whom are women.

Ireland: restoring pay in the non-profit sector

The threat of strike action by members of the SIPTU trade union employed in the non-profit social services sector has led to an agreement on negotiations to reverse the pay cuts imposed as part of austerity measures. The union had been campaigning for some time to get the government to commit to funding so-called Section 39 organisations so that they could deliver pay restoration for the sector in line with what has already been agreed in the national public sector negotiations. The strike action planned for 14 February was postponed by up to six weeks to allow time for the management of the relevant Section 39 organisations to respond.

Denmark: major dispute under way but extra funding on the table to cover care staff shortages

Care workers are set to benefit from a new collective agreement in the municipal sector if unions are successful in their negotiations to deliver higher pay increases to lower paid workers and particularly women. Bargaining is currently stalled and union plans to organise targeted strike action in April, involving around 10% of public sector workers, have been met with an employer threat to lockout 90% of state workers and 50% of local government workers.

However, at an early stage of the negotiations the KL municipal employers' organisation did say that it would allocate around 500 million krone (EUR 67 million) to tackle major staffing shortages in health and social care. In December, KL and the FOA public services union issued a joint report which revealed that 73% of municipalities faced shortages of skilled staff, particularly in the field of eldercare. FOA gave a positive reaction to the news but underlined that they and other public sector unions still had key demands for tackling low pay and the gender pay gap.

UK: Home care workers take action over split shifts and job cuts

Hundreds of home care staff, members of the Unison trade union, joined a strike and demonstration in Birmingham in central England on 20 January in protest at plans to slash jobs and impose a new three-shift pattern on workers. The workers had voted by a massive majority to take strike action with the first stoppage running from 11.30 to 14.00 and with a further stoppage taking place on 6 February. The workers say that the new shift pattern (7.00-10.00; 12.00-14.00; 16.00-22.00) will make it impossible for them to have proper rest breaks and put the quality of care at risk. Around 150 jobs are also under threat.

Care sector initiatives in 2017

While 2018 is already proving an active year for many care workers, there was plenty going on in 2017 too with actions and other initiatives in many countries, including: a major victory for residential care workers in [Spain](#), negotiations in the private care sector in [Finland](#), challenges in the non-profit sector in [Germany](#) and [Belgium](#), action over the right to strike in [Switzerland](#), negotiating large pay increases in the [Czech Republic](#), surveys exposing work pressures in [Sweden](#) and poor working conditions in the [UK](#), petition in support of childcare workers in [Austria](#), action on staffing in private sector in the [Netherlands](#) and also staffing and funding issues in [Austria](#), pay for care assistants in [Sweden](#), pay in eldercare in [Italy](#) and [Denmark](#) and fair pay in home care contracts in the [Netherlands](#).

The European-wide challenge: more funding and investment

EPSU affiliates have been stepping up their demands for better pay and working conditions for the millions of mainly female care workers across Europe. However, the underlying challenge is to secure large and sustained increases in funding and investment for the sector. While the European institutions have acknowledged the importance of investment in social infrastructure, the message has to be about increased public investment as a priority rather than looking to private funding as the solution.



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