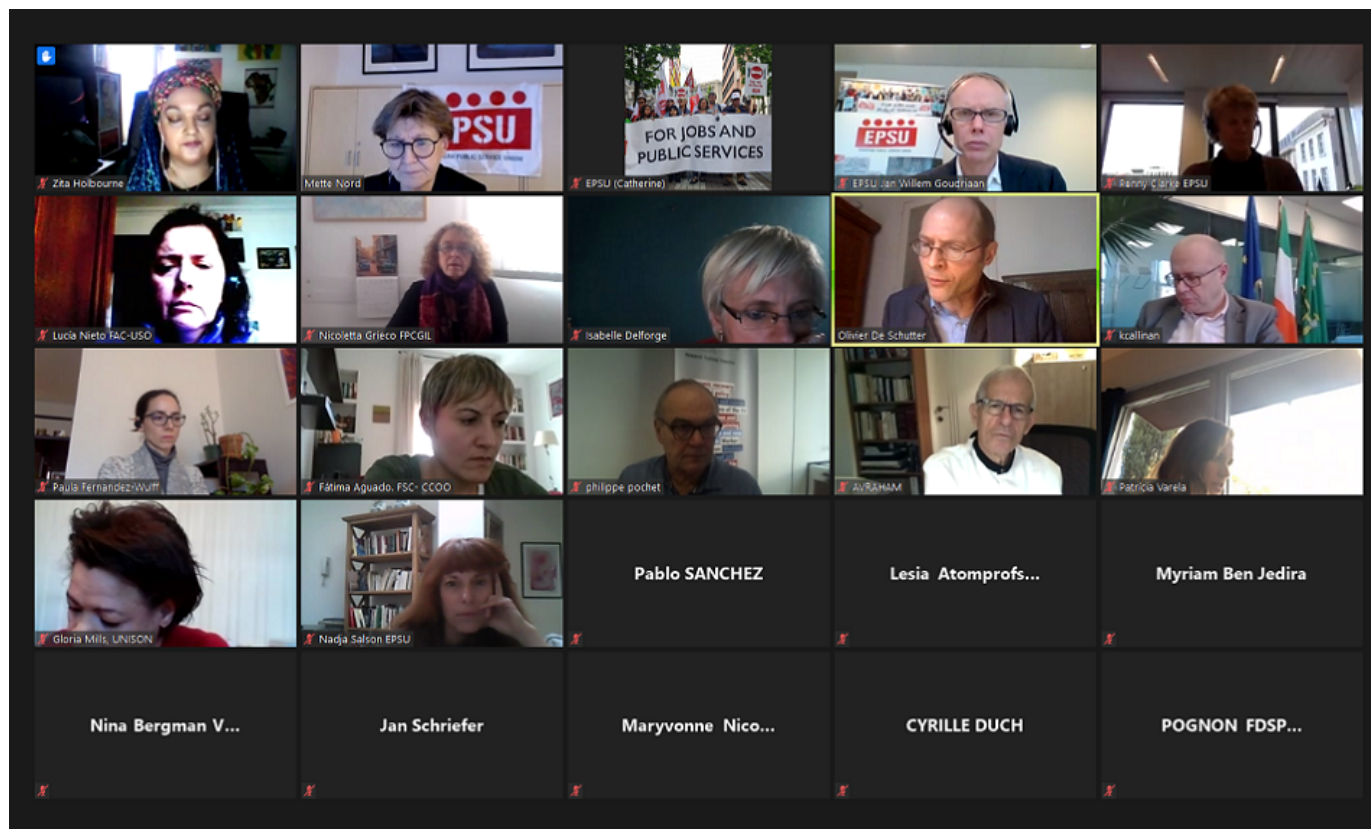


## EPSU Round Table with the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights



(16 December 2020) **“Public services are not only the greatest leveller, they civilise our societies”**. This was a key message from EPSU members and Philippe Pochet, ETUI, to the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty in a recent round table organised by EPSU. The UN Rapporteur, Olivier De Schutter is currently drafting a report to the EU institutions on the role of the EU’s policies, especially economic policy, on extreme poverty.

The EU has yet to give a proper place to public services. Rarely mentioned - there is not even one word on public services in Jacques Delors' famous paper on Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) – the EU's policies of liberalisation and fiscal consolidation have had negative impacts on the human right to accessible, affordable and high-quality public services. In times of COVID-19, growing ecological crisis and escalating poverty and inequality, public services are vital to ensure the cohesion and security needed not only for the poor, but for all of us.

As participants at the round table discussed, following the economic crisis of 2008 Member States made heavy cuts in their health budgets, dismantling their capacity to provide a proper response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The option of increasing public finance, through fair and progressive taxation, was never on the table. On the contrary, low tax, minimal regulation, decentralised collective bargaining and weak workers' protections were promoted as a recipe for economic success. As the Rapporteur commented, it is striking that while the Commission monitors so much of the fiscal and economic policy of Member States, it does not monitor the progressivity of taxation. Choosing not to do something is also a political choice.

The need to build EU “resilience” through strengthening public services was a second key message. To build the future resilience of our societies, it is essential to secure public investment and funding now to in order to tackle the health treatment backlog, reduce inequalities and build our public health systems, to address poor and insufficient housing, inadequate social services, lack of pre-school childcare and education, and to improve the conditions in elderly care. Fair and equitable access to public services which allows people to exercise their human rights, such as the right to water, energy and care, can only be guaranteed by public systems, and workers in public services need decent employment conditions to fulfil their tasks properly. The increase in ‘working poor’ has also included public service workers. In many countries, good jobs have been outsourced or privatised, compromising service delivery as well workers livelihoods, and benefiting only tax dodgers.

This leads to a third message: the importance of collective bargaining to deliver more equality. Collective agreements help to increase wages, especially for the lowest paid. Examples were given of recent agreements in which the lowest paid workers obtained larger pay increases than the standard pay increase.

Strengthening collective bargaining and ensuring respect for human rights, including trade union rights, will be key for the EU to develop a Social Europe.

Looking beyond COVID-19, a return to “austerity” for the many and continuing enrichment for the few is unacceptable. While current flexibility for Member States budgets is permitted, long-term shifts in EU economic policy are necessary to avoid pressure for future cuts in public services. The EU national recovery plans must address long-term social needs, to ensure that social systems are strengthened.

The Special Rapporteur’s report will be presented early next year.

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