

# **A New Year - old challenges - new prospects and opportunities**

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I wish you all good health for the new year. It begins for many of us with further, sometimes stricter, lockdowns. However, the anti-COVID vaccines are being rolled out, notably with a high rate of vaccinations in Israel as well as early starts in Denmark, Iceland, Russia and UK. There are debates over which groups of workers need to be vaccinated after those in health and social care. France recently added home carers and firefighters to the list while elsewhere prison staff and prisoners are being considered. All workers facing a high risk of infection as they keep our public services running should be vaccinated. The vaccines will play a crucial role to keep society going and stimulate growth.

## **Public investment not austerity**

Growth, green and socially sustainable, will mainly have to come from public funding and investment as many private companies don't have the resources. Austerity should be out of the question. OECD chief economist Laurence Boone makes [this point very clear](#), suggesting that the Eurozone and individual countries fundamentally change their approach to debt and fiscal policy. We need to remain vigilant to ensure public service workers do not pay the price of the crisis.

## **23 June EPSU action day**

Our members in health, social care and many other public services continue to face exceptionally high workloads. Let 2021 be a better year for all of them. As we said at our Executive Committee meeting in November, we want to work for a better and fairer world after the pandemic. Our action day for public service workers on 23 June will be a moment to show our determination to stand up for that different world. There is much work to do.

The Bloomberg Billionaires index showed that the world's 500 richest people recorded the largest annual gain of wealth in its history. In contrast, tens of millions of workers have seen their incomes fall, millions have lost their jobs and the UN has said that 207 million more people will be living in extreme poverty by 2030 bringing the total to one billion. That needs to change. The insane wealth of the likes of Bezos (Amazon) Musk (Tesla) Gates, Zuckerberg (Facebook) and Arnault (LVMH) must be taxed more and we have to bring wealth taxes back onto the political agenda. That is part of the solution to achieve more equitable growth. We continue to work for tax justice and are pleased that addressing tax avoidance has a high place on the agenda of the Portuguese Presidency that started on 1 January. We will be pushing, in particular, to get progress on public country-by-country reporting for corporations.

### **EU pillar of social rights**

The Portuguese Presidency has made the EU pillar of social rights one of its priorities. Progress on the draft directive on adequate minimum wages is part of it and we will discuss this on 12 January in the EPSU collective bargaining working group. We can also expect new initiatives on gender pay transparency, occupational health and safety strategy and an action plan to implement the pillar. Furthermore, the European Commission will propose how to go forward with the social dialogue in response to the report by former German labour minister, Andrea Nahles, that is due in February. Meanwhile, the opinion of the advocate-general in the EPSU court case is expected on 20 January and the final verdict later this year. The Commission will need to repair the damage it has done to the social dialogue.

### **Trade, public services and labour rights**

Trade will also be on the Portuguese Presidency's agenda. However, corporate trade deals like the one signed between the EU and China will not change the powers that be. China has not signed the key ILO conventions 87 and 98 and has no intention of doing so. Restating its international obligations is not progress. The European Commission has negotiated to allow private hospitals in China, a growing market, to be open to foreign capital. There are very few European companies that are active in this market and so why did the Commission seek or accept this? It is further evidence that the Commission cannot be trusted to protect Europe's health sector from competition, something that the USA will certainly want in any trade agreement. We can't allow this. The deal with China has faced serious criticism and raises the risk that the EU will remain silent over attacks on people's rights. There was some delay before the EU's high-level representative condemned the attacks on democracy activists in Hong Kong on 6 January. The independent unions in China risk being pushed further into a corner as EU leaders compromise on fundamental rights to allow companies to increase profits.

### **EU-UK trade and cooperation agreement**

Just before the New Year the EU concluded the trade deal with the UK. Over 1250 pages to which the European and UK parliaments can only say yay or nay. The UK's new immigration rules will have a major impact on the care sector which relies on thousands of EU nationals to plug major gaps in staffing. The end of mutual recognition of professional qualifications will also affect recruitment in health care. Commitments on social and environmental rights in the deal are weak and there is no regulatory alignment, although there is a non-regression clause. It is likely that the UK government will use whatever space it has to seek competitive advantage by diverting from the EU regulatory regime, especially in relation to social rights, standards and taxation. One area of concern is that the rebalancing mechanism to maintain a level playing field does not cover financial services, undermining the fight against tax avoidance, tax havens and tax dumping. That will benefit the rich and wealthy more than working families. Fighting such negative changes will be an important part of our struggle in the years to come.

### **Proud Boys vs Black Lives Matter**

We all witnessed the coup attempt by Trump and his cronies, not just in Washington but it happened across the capitals in the different states. Harrowing. The [US unions](#) condemned it and following calls by EPSU ([here](#) and [here](#)), the EU high representative and the EU Commission President joined in. The events have raised many questions, not least the contrast between the lack of arrests of the mainly white protesters and the aggressive policing and arrests of Black Lives Matter and anti-fascist activists in earlier demonstrations. The fact that many Republican lawmakers continue to deny the legitimacy of the elections, despite the lack of evidence and over 60 failed legal cases does not bode well for the future.

### **European political parties and Slovenia**

There is a lesson here for the EPP and Renew European political groups. You cannot maintain links with the likes of Viktor Orban in Hungary, Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic or Janez Janša in Slovenia without becoming corrupted and dragged towards the extreme right. Janša is leading Slovenia down the road towards an authoritarian state. Critical voices in the media and cultural world have been silenced. And just before the new year changes to the labour code were railroaded through Parliament without consultation or negotiation with the unions. The Slovenian union movement is considering industrial and strike action to oppose this and they can count on the support of EPSU.

Slovenia will take over the EU Presidency on 1 July. How can there be any confidence in statements around social dialogue, support for collective bargaining with such a government? In the first days of the new year we intervened with the government of Serbia over the dismissal of a trade union leader and with the government of North Macedonia over not respecting the collective agreement for public service workers. The EU Commission has to do more to prevent governments from Slovenia and other countries from riding roughshod over their commitments to collective bargaining and social dialogue.

### **Earthquake in Croatia**

We will be circulating a call for solidarity for the Croatian unions following the earthquake on 29 December. Many workers lost their homes and union buildings were damaged. I hope your union will be able to donate. The quake exposed the scandal of poor quality private construction with the collapse of houses built after the war in 1996. I also expressed our solidarity with our Norwegian president, Mette Nord, over the terrible landslide in Ask (Gjerdrum) on 30 December that cost seven people their lives. In both cases first responders and emergency workers did their utmost and deserve our respect and thanks.

And so the year has started. Our challenges are clear. Join the fight for a better future and let's work together to achieve it sooner rather than later.

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