

## **A new socio-ecological contract will mean challenging the powers that be**

Date

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The role of the state and public services have been vital in the response to the pandemic, underlining the importance of systems based on solidarity, cooperation, coordination and social dialogue to our economies and societies. This was one of the main messages from several speakers, including renowned academic Mariana Mazzucato, at last week's conference on a new social-ecological contract. The conference was organised by the ETUC and ETUI (the research and training arm of the ETUC) and Commission President Ursula von der Leyen was another keynote speaker, using the opportunity to call 2021 the year of social dialogue. Fine, but we in EPSU have seen how the Commission has reacted to the outcome of social dialogue and how it has been prepared to throw 25 years of experience down the drain and argue that it, and it alone, decides on how to deal with social partner agreements.

Von der Leyen further praised the work of the Commission in linking, for example, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to its work. I joined a panel on “Beyond GDP”. For many this involves a new set of indicators and benchmarks, different from the sole figure of GDP and more appropriate to measures marking progress towards achieving the SDGs. These indicators would take into account environmental and social factors and assist politicians in making “better” decisions. More work has been done on these measurements since the EPSU-ETUI joint conference in 2012. But one thing has not changed. For a new approach to be accepted it will require challenging entrenched interests and changing power structures. As the European Environmental Agency said in one of its briefings: “Transitions are also conflictual and deeply political, producing trade-offs, winners and losers, and related struggles, as politically influential and well-resourced incumbents often resist change.” And for those changes to happen, we need to strengthen the voice of workers, our union power and cooperation all the way from the workplace right up to the European and global levels. This is a battle we need to fight with many other organisations.

***Vaccines, a bad idea and breeching the ideological wall***

The availability of vaccines is dominating discussions across Europe. We want them to be available as soon as possible to all frontline public services workers and it is unacceptable that there are delays in vaccinating health and care workers. Our affiliates in Central Asia report that their governments are working with the Russian vaccine, and seek to broaden their supplies with Chinese vaccines. These are also gaining prominence in the Western Balkan countries. EU governments have realized they need to expand production and the Commission, Council and the European Parliament are more assertive on the issue. However, there some bad ideas are also floating around like the one from the Brussels think-tank CEPS which proposes that big pharma companies are offered a hefty premium for each vaccine produced. That is the world upside down. It does make clear that the forces that protect the status quo in which corporations and their supporters rule, will do what it takes to keep money and power rolling to them. The alternatives of using a waiver on patent rights in the World Trade Organisation or to bring the pharma-companies under public control and invest directly in public production capacity are not even thought off. This ideological wall needs to be breeched. Millions of health and care workers, public services workers and other frontline staff let alone the population at large are waiting for the vaccines. EPSU has demanded more determined action.

### ***Protests in Spain and elsewhere***

Unions across Europe are prioritizing the new socio-ecological focus in the national recovery plans. They are calling for increased investments in health and care, in infrastructure and the modernization of public services. If it is done right, the recovery can bring forward the Green and Social Deal. Unfortunately, we have to fend off resistance from employers and austerity hawks. Our Spanish comrades are organizing protests on 11 February to underline the need for worker-friendly reforms of labour law and pensions. They want the government to reject the link being made between the recovery fund and neo-liberal structural reforms. We have expressed our solidarity and wish them success. Our Romanian comrades of the ATU transport union organized protests against their employer, Metronex, because it did not wish to honour an agreement on wages and sought other changes without negotiations. Together with the ETF transport workers' federation we addressed the government responsible for the funding.

Protests continue in Belarus, supported by the independent unions, as many workers and others continue their opposition to the regime. Its repression has increased with jail sentences for some striking workers. Protests in Russia are different and not supported by the unions but, in all cases, we as unions should strongly defend the right to protest and oppose repression of demonstrations and strikes, even if we disagree. It will be too easy for authorities to target the unions next and who will we count on to defend us? We cannot tolerate repression. That is why the global labour movement has come out so strongly against the coup in Myanmar, expressing our solidarity with working people and the Myanmar trade unions.

Our joint European action day on public services will be on 23 June – a visible moment in our struggle together to change the powers that be.

For the [\*speech of Commission President Von der Leyen\*](#) to the ETUC/ETUI conference

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