

The COVID-19 pandemic one year on: the need to revalue our public services



(10 March 2021) One year ago today, the World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. The last year has magnified the strengths and weaknesses of our societies. In Europe, it has exposed the fragility of public health systems, and the total lack of capacity to respond to such a shock. The tragedy is that this does not come as a surprise. Europe's public service unions were protesting staff shortages, underfunding and inadequate resources long before the outbreak of the pandemic. When the first wave hit, it is no wonder that health systems and care homes were completely overwhelmed.

It is a sad reflection on neoliberal policies that it takes a watershed moment such as a global pandemic to acknowledge the need for well-funded public services and the workers that deliver them. But the last year has made the draw backs of privatisation and budget cuts an unavoidable fact, and there is now a broad understanding that we need a revaluing of the public sector. We cannot go back to the austerity policies of a pre-pandemic world – we must build back better. That is the message of the millions of public service workers across Europe on this milestone day.

The immediate priority is to strengthen public health and care systems. This requires public funding and an end to taxation policies that favour corporations and the rich. Governments must act here at both national and European level. We owe this to our health and care workers, many of whom are being treated for post-traumatic stress.

Just as there were over 100 strikes in the health and care sectors in Europe just before the outbreak of the pandemic, health and care unions will continue to be militant in demanding pay rises, better working conditions, increased staffing levels and support services.

While health and social care are at the forefront of concern, other public services have also been on the frontline of the crisis. From the waste, water and energy sectors, to social security and employment services, public service workers have been crucial in the continued functioning of society and in dealing with the socioeconomic fallout from lockdown measures. Their role will become more crucial as we recover from the economic crisis. Increased investment is necessary to guarantee the availability and quality of services, and to ensure access to welfare, housing, water, energy and education, as well as financing for cities and municipalities.

The public sector also has a unique role to play in rebuilding more resilient societies, from the circular economy, to green transport systems to clean public infrastructure. National (and EU) recovery and resilience funds should be used for this, rather than falling into the usual mistakes of privatisation and public-private-partnerships.

This unprecedented health crisis shows that the EU must consider reacquiring certain sectors which guarantee European citizens' security, such as pharmaceuticals, or the production of PPE. It should also reconsider establishing European competences in the field of health, beyond those of member states, in order to respond to pandemics, both in the EU, and in third countries. The shortcomings revealed during this crisis underline that a large part of the EU recovery fund must be allocated to investment in public services, which represent the universal values underpinning the EU.

As European public service union leaders, will be fighting with many others for labour market equality, better working conditions and more public investment. Along with a growing movement, we stand for tax justice to ensure that corporations pay their fair share and to reverse growing inequality. It is crucial that in the recovery from what is set to be the worst ever economic crisis, workers, communities and our planet are prioritised over the profits of the few.

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