

Undermining women's rights and our joint values

Date

Wednesday, March 24, 2021 - 12:00

On 20 March, with a total disregard of the democratic process the Turkish government withdrew from the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combatting violence against women. Turkish unions and women's groups condemned the act and took to the streets. EPSU, the ETUC, the Council of Europe and the European Union all joined the condemnation of the decision, taken without any discussion in the Turkish Parliament. Women, girls and members of the LGBT+ community will suffer as a result.

The Turkish government justifies its action by referring to family values and culture. Culture, tradition, family and honour are no justification for psychological, physical and sexual violence, sexual harassment, forced abortion and forced sterilisation. But Turkey is not alone in Europe. Neither Russia nor Azerbaijan has signed the convention and Russia is among a larger group of countries that has not ratified ILO convention 190 to stop violence against women. These include the UK, Ukraine, Moldova and Armenia along with several EU Member States – Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia. The European Commission has committed to introduce legislation if all countries don't sign and ratify the Convention and it is high time that Commission President Von der Leyen and equalities Commissioner Dali now propose this.

It is extremely worrying that the Polish government has also indicated it may withdraw from the Istanbul Convention. It is lobbying other conservative governments in the EU which have not ratified it and is even talking with the Slovenian government about signing a new treaty. This treaty would stress family above the individual and ban abortion and same sex marriages. This would be an affront to the values of the European Union, the Council of Europe and the European Treaty on Human Rights. Poland is already under scrutiny by the Commission about rule-of-law issues and by the Council of Europe's Commission for Democracy through Law – the Venice Commission.

The Polish government has repeatedly been condemned for failing to protect the LGBT+ community against hate speech and acts of violence and discrimination and for ending the right to abortion. Hungary and Slovenia are following similar paths, attacking women's and LGBT+ rights, journalists and media freedom and undermining the independence of the judiciary. These actions are possible because people in power like those in the European People's Party have condoned them for too long. EPSU will stand in solidarity with workers and unions in defence of our democratic values and human rights.

The fight for the human right to water in Europe

On 22 March – World Water Day – EPSU published an overview of the successes of unions and the water movement in advancing the human right to water. Our biggest achievement is one that you do not notice although we experience it every day: Europe's water services have not been liberalised and opened up for competition. However, the fight continues. The European Commission has started new investigations into water concessions while investors are promoting the trade in water at the New York Stock Exchange. This was condemned by Pedro Arrojo-Agudo, the UN special rapporteur on the human right to water and to sanitation and EPSU has joined with the European water movement in issuing a statement against the commercialisation of water. Water is not a commodity.

7 April World Health Day – a day of action

And we have a similar message for 7 April. We are standing up against the commercialisation of our health and care services. Health and care are rights, not commodities, and the pandemic underlines how crucial this is. Unions will be advocating for vaccines to be made available to all and not just in the EU and rich countries. We want the European Commission to support our demand for the waiver of the intellectual property rights on vaccines in the World Trade Organisation. The EU should take the reins of the big pharma companies and lead the production and distribution processes. For EPSU unions it is an opportunity to call for more public funding for health and care, for more staff to tackle stress and burn-out and for higher pay and better working conditions. It is a day to advocate for the public nature of care services and restore the duty and the primary responsibility of the public authorities to provide health and care services and develop our public health and care systems.

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