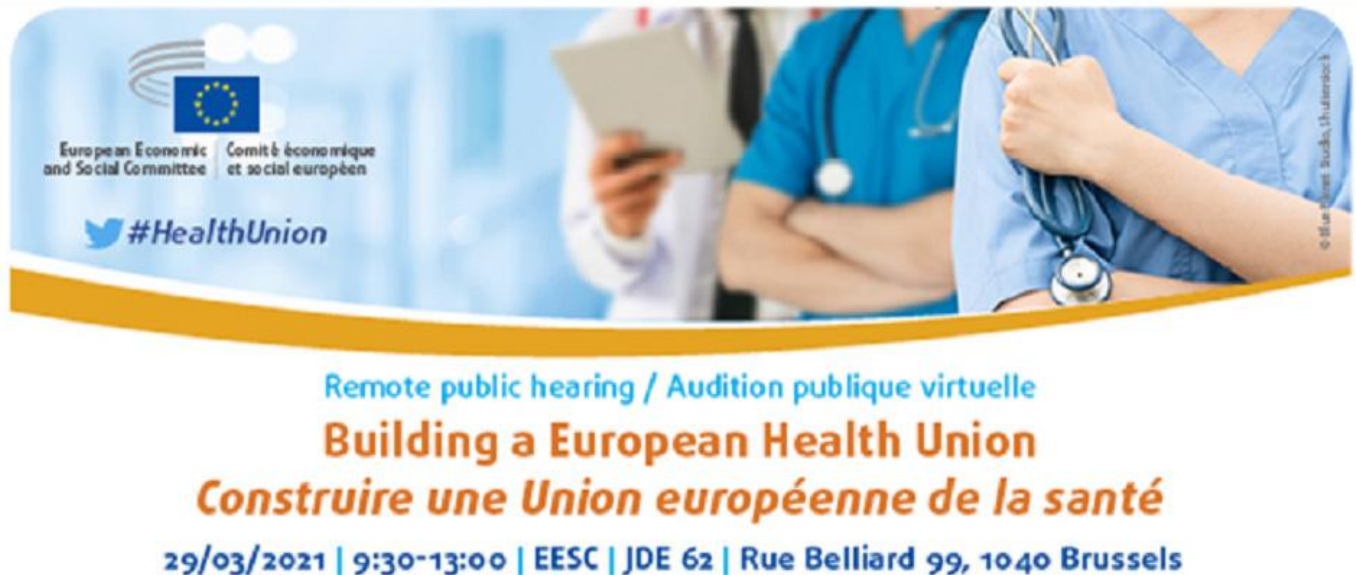


EPSU contributes to the European Economic and Social Committee's opinion on “Building the European Health Union”



(1st April 2021) The EU health union is a priority to ensure there is a better and more coordinated response to cross-border health threats and pandemics. We want that the role of workers is recognized and our voice is heard in that health union. EPSU was invited to discuss this and its priorities with the European Economic and Social Committee, 29 March.

The EPSU General Secretary stressed the urgent need for Members States for increasing expenditure on health and social care and to integrate this in European policies. The workers on the frontline of the pandemic in health and social service, thousands of whom died, should be properly recognized by the policy makers. Workers deserve higher pay and increased Occupational Health and Safety protection. Many workers are exhausted after more than a year dealing with the pandemic and many of them consider leaving their jobs. Adequate staffing levels are important. Already before the pandemic the health and social care sector suffered from inadequate levels of staffing. The pandemic increased staff shortages. We want the Members States with the support of the EU to address the issue of staff recruitment and retention to make our health and social services more resilient.

More investment needed; health and care are not commodities

EPSU stressed that the EU should invest more in health and include also the often-forgotten social services. It should look foremost of the workers and all workers in the health and social services including doctors, nurses, admin personnel, cleaners, ambulance drivers, home carers etc. A strong European Health Union needs to deliver an integrated approach to healthcare in the EU Members States from primary care to long term care to mental health. Furthermore, the union needs to address inequalities in access to health and care. And all of this is depending on sustainable funding. EPSU and our affiliates have called for more spending on and investment in the health and social care sector and more attention to the future of the sector in the EU Member States. This starts by acknowledging that health and care are public goods not the commodities you can sell to the highest bidder.

Trade unions need a voice in the European Health Union

Furthermore, the EPSU General Secretary underlined that trade unions on the European and national level should be consulted in the relevant bodies including in the preparation of the regional, national and European preparedness plans.

Preparedness is a health and safety issue and risk assessment from the workplace up can assist. The plans should assess and monitor the adequate number of personnel required for dealing with health emergencies. With regards to data collection, there is a need for more transparency in terms of reporting data on health of workers in the sector. Many Member States do not report the number of death workers, nor we have a full data on the vaccination of healthcare workers.

Assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the commission proposals, Jan Willem Goudriann welcomed the fact that the budget for the EU4 health was increased also due to the protest of EPSU in October last year. Providing more competencies to the agencies to cooperate and coordinate in times of cross border health threats is welcome. Unions need a voice and including in the new Health Security Agency (HERA). More attention should be given to recruitment and retention of staff including in neglected social services. The initiative should aim to ensure more equal access to healthcare system and reduce health inequalities. The EU Health Union should consider introducing targets to achieve standards for high quality and inclusive public healthcare systems.

The hearing took place 29 march. EPSU General Secretary Jan Willem Goudriaan along with Adam Rogalewski, policy officer responsible for health and social services participated in the public hearing organized by the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) related to its opinion on Building the European Health Union. Adam Rogalewski is an expert of the workers' group. The opinion covers the following initiatives of the EU Commission: (1) Communication on Building a European Health Union: Reinforcing the EU's resilience for cross-border health threats; (2) Proposal for a Regulation on a reinforced role for the European Medicines Agency in crisis preparedness and management for medicinal products and medical devices; (3) Proposal for a Regulation amending Regulation (EC) No 851/2004 establishing a European Centre for disease prevention and control; (4) Proposal for a Regulation on serious cross-border threats to health and repealing Decision No 1082/2013/EU.

At the meeting of the study group following the public hearing Adam Rogalewski introduced EPSU amendments to the discussed text of the opinion.

The opinion will be adopted by the EESC in April.

Here is the link to the website:

<https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/agenda/our-events/events/building-european-health-union/programme>

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