

Public services under strain

Date

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Despite the International Court of Justice demanding that Russia end its hostilities, the war in Ukraine continues at great human cost. While many in Russia deny that their troops target civilians, the destruction of villages, towns and cities is plain for all to see. Ten million people have been displaced, with over 3.5 million of these leaving the country. Many from the Roma communities in Ukraine are among the refugees and they face discrimination as they flee and reach other countries. EPSU argues strongly that human rights apply to everyone and, as expressed in the ETUC resolution on Ukraine, we need to be vigilant about protecting the fundamental values that we stand for.

Funding for our public services - time for wealth taxes...

EPSU's Ukrainian affiliates are helping to find shelter for people in the country while we continue to work with the unions and the ITUC Solidarity Fund to assess needs and how we can assist. Across Europe public service unions are doing their utmost to help refugees as their increasing numbers expose the existing problems of underfunded public services.

Our Moldovan affiliates report that health and other services are under enormous strain while the paperwork required to ensure refugees have access to housing, child allowance and other benefits is adding to the workloads of staff in social security administrations. The Polish trade union ZUS, says that many of its members are overloaded and exhausted. This is a worsening of an existing problem, compounded by low pay, low morale, lack of staff and modern equipment. Our predominantly female public service workforce feels exploited and sees little respect for the crucial role it plays. The European Union needs to do more to assist.

Several unions already report that governments and employers are using the war as an excuse to say there is no funding to meet workers' demands. It is high time that national governments and the EU Commission address inequalities and consider wealth and corporate taxes to boost public revenues. EPSU will oppose any attempts to use the war as an excuse to deregulate labour markets, lower wages, or block progress on social rights.

Actions across Europe

Many of our unions are taking action to resist such pressures as we report the collective bargaining newsletter, Europe's only source of news on the negotiations, campaigning and actions taken by public service unions. EPSU has expressed solidarity with the workers involved and we can expect further struggles over increasing energy prices and how to compensate for inflation. Albanian unions report several days of protests as the government failed to curb prices.

EPSU has long argued that the EU's internal market and its deregulation of prices fails to protect domestic households. More people are coming to see the downside of competition, pushing those without market power into energy poverty. Even the European Commission has opened the door to the possibility of taxing the excessive profits of energy companies. This will not be enough as huge investments will be needed to wean Europe away from Russian gas and stay on the path of the Green Deal. This can only be done with public investment and in a regulated environment.

We see no scope for public-private partnerships, blended finance, or incentives for the private sector to invest which will all come down to the same: allowing some to get away with huge profits at our expense. Unions have alternatives and we say the future is public. Public services based on democratic processes and participation allow us to realise human rights and achieve social justice and wellbeing for the many. And on 23 June, Public Service Day, we will make our demands visible together.

Social care

On 21 March delegations from EPSU and the social service employers met with employment and social affairs Commissioner Nicolas Schmit. We discussed the impact of the war and the large number of refugees on social care services and the other issues facing the sector. We expect the forthcoming European Care Strategy to address workforce shortages, low pay and the need to strengthen collective bargaining and social dialogue. The Commissioner was positive towards the joint demand to establish a social services social dialogue committee. The Commission is also aware of the scandal enveloping the ORPEA social care multinational. We stressed that there is no place for commercialisation in care, and that the European Care Strategy should not promote this.

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