

Big business opposes the exclusion of public services from the TTIP trade deal

(9 June 2015) Last week I was sent a copy of an email from Markus Beyrer, the Director General of BusinessEurope, the European employer and corporate lobby organisation. Beyrer was writing to members of the European Parliament to get them to oppose the exclusion of public services from the TTIP trade agreement. He also questioned the European Parliament's reference to labour rights while maintaining BusinessEurope's demands for a corporate bill of rights (the so-called Investor State Dispute Settlement system) *"We are concerned about the request to exclude public services - irrespective of how they are provided and funded - as the EU should not put in question its own multilateral commitments in the WTO (World Trade Organisation) General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). Furthermore, we warn against overloading EU's trade agenda with sustainability objectives that are unachievable and request that efficient and reliable instruments to enforce investors' rights are put in place."*

EPSU has repeatedly stressed that businesses want to use international trade agreements like TTIP and also CETA (EU-Canada) and TISA (multi-country negotiations on services) to open up public services and to make it impossible to reverse liberalisation and privatisation. BusinessEurope's reference to the provisions in GATS agreement underline that statements made by Commissioner Malmström and the US ambassador to the EU in defence of public services are meaningless if not followed up with concrete and unambiguous text. The report of the European Parliament's Trade Committee (INTA) was clear about the exclusion of public services partly thanks to the lobbying of national MEPs by EPSU affiliates and others. BusinessEurope is now working to get this overturned in the plenary vote on 10 June. With our colleagues of the European Education Trade Unions (ETUCE) EPSU has written to the MEPs on behalf of our 20 million members to keep public services out of TTIP.

But BusinessEurope doesn't only target public services. Their statement mentions "unachievable sustainability objectives" and this is a reference to the demand of the European Parliament that the US abide by the conventions of the International

Labour Organisation (ILO). The US is one of the very few countries in the world that has not signed core ILO Conventions such as no. 87 on freedom of association. In a contribution to this year's ILO Conference, now underway in Geneva, former Brazilian President Lula argues how important this is for workers to organise themselves and take collective action. During his time as president, he ensured that Brazil signed ILO convention 151 that underlines how this right can be applied to the public sector.

The European Parliament wants binding and enforceable rights and also seeks to extend the right to information and consultation (based on the European Works Council directive) to companies active in the Transatlantic area. BusinessEurope knows that the US government, under pressure from US and European businesses will not support such rights. The TTIP agreement could thus falter if the Parliament sticks to its demands. And thousands of public service workers are asking the MEPs to be firm. They are participating in a picture action initiated by EPSU. If you have not taken a picture please do so. Our action goes on until 23 June, Global Public Service Day and the same day on which the European Commission is organising a stakeholder meeting on trade. We can make a difference in this discussion. The only group that is supporting TTIP are the employers. CEMR, the organisation of [municipalities](#) is also questioning TTIP and calls for public services to be excluded.

I met colleagues from some of EPSU's UK affiliates last week. It was on the same day that the UK government announced cuts in public finance for most ministries and further plans for "efficiency gains", usually involving pay freezes, the outsourcing of staff to reduce jobs and to put workers on lower pay and conditions. The public service unions will also be confronted with further restrictions on the right to strike making it harder to oppose such policies. The importance of the right to strike to defend workers rights and to seek progress is currently being demonstrated in Germany. After the large demonstrations and strike action of childcare workers, employers have returned to the negotiating table but their latest offer is not much better. The unions and the employers have now agreed to use (non-binding) arbitration during which strike action is suspended but can be taken up again.

It is not just the Conservative government in the UK that is pushing the neo-liberal agenda. Our colleagues in Finland are similarly confronted with cuts in finance for public services. And it is still prevalent at the Eurozone level where, not for the first time, the negotiations between the EU, European Central Bank, International

Monetary Fund and the Greek government led by Syriza, are faltering. The "blame the Greek-side" game is in fully swing. The Greek government wants a social solution, with no further cuts in pensions nor more flexibility of the labour market which is code language for undermining collective bargaining. It wants to prevent Greece from being pushed further into debt with no prospect of investment or economic growth. The EPSU Executive in April supported this direction and we will continue to advocate this with the ETUC and others.

And to end with a positive result for our colleagues from the unions involved in the social dialogue committee for Central Government Administrations. They agreed a joint position with the European employers, EUPAE, in response to the European Commission's consultation on the review of the EU Information and Consultation Directives. Currently workers in public administration in a large number of Member States are excluded from information and consultation rights under the EU directives. Together with the employers we stress the fundamental right of workers to be informed and consulted on decisions effecting their workplace independent of the nature of the employer (public or private). We recognise that central government can have differences from the private sector due to the political and public interest role. To take this into account we have agreed to negotiate a legally binding agreement with the employers. If successful this will close an important gap.

In solidarity

Jan Willem Goudriaan

EPSU General Secretary

- [Log in](#) to post comments
- [Printer-friendly version](#)

Policies

[Trade](#)