

Childcare: more quality less commercialisation

(2 June 2016) EPSU affiliates from 14 countries met in Brussels yesterday to discuss the latest developments in the childcare sector and the main challenges facing trade unions. While acknowledging the increase in provision in several countries there was serious concern about ensuring quality of service and quality of employment. Several participants also highlighted trends towards privatisation and commercialisation that they saw as undermining attempts to improve quality.

Some of the other common themes identified included:

- Problem of low pay, with childcare workers in some countries on or near minimum wage levels;
- Very challenging working environment and pressure of workloads;
- Staff shortages, inadequate training and high turnover; and
- Funding difficulties, particularly in relation to local and regional government and wide variations of provision across regions.

The afternoon debate focused on the European Semester – the process of economic policy coordination which, more recently, has highlighted the importance of social investment, including early years care and education. Representatives of the public (CEEP) and private (BusinessEurope) employer organisations, the European Commission, the European Trade Union Confederation and the Eurochild campaigning and lobbying group joined the discussion.

While there was general consensus about the need for increased investment in childcare the panellists had their own take on some of the detail.

Guillaume Afellat, policy officer for social affairs at CEEP, thought that the Commission was saying the right things but was still failing to recognise the value of childcare and other social services to the economy. He argued strongly that these should not be seen as “unproductive” sectors, but crucial to growth and competitiveness.

In response to a criticism that the European Commission was still too focused on restricting public spending, Evelyn Astor, from the Directorate-General for

Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, argued the Commission has acknowledged, notably in the 2016 Annual Growth Survey, that fiscal consolidation needs to be equity friendly and that there is a need for greater social investment. She added that the Commission was looking at the evidence from longer-term studies on the benefits of investing in childcare.

Jana Hainsworth, secretary general of Eurochild, stressed that while some positive things were being said at European level, the reality was that childcare and children's services in many countries had been badly hit by austerity measures. She underlined the need to keep the focus on delivering quality early years education and care but argued that this was only a part of a range of measures that was needed to ensure children's educational and social development.

For Guillaume Cravero senior advisor at BusinessEurope childcare was crucial for increasing women's employment which was a key factor in driving growth across Europe. He added that a proper cost benefit analysis, not just in monetary terms, could support arguments in favour of boosting childcare.

In the final contribution to the panel debate, Cinzia Sechi, advisor at the ETUC, said that the social partners had a particular role to play in this debate both at national and European levels. She expressed some surprise that the Commission had not really followed up its initial research into the significant prospects for employment growth in the sector and an absolutely essential question arising from this was how to guarantee the quality of jobs being created.

EPSU would be taking up these issues again in the lead up to the next Semester, beginning with the consultation over the Annual Growth Survey in the autumn. A report of the conference would go to the next meeting of EPSU's Social Services Working Group in September and its Gender and Women's Equality Committee in November.



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