European Action Day against privatisation, marketisation and commercialisation in the Health and Social Care Sectors on World Health Day

(7 April 2017) EPSU and its affiliates took part in a series of activities in support of the 2nd European Action Day against privatisation, marketisation and commercialisation within the health and social care sectors. These activities coordinated to coincide with mobilisations of trade unions and social movements linked to/around World Health Day which took place in about 80 European cities on the 7th of April, challenging the privatisation, marketisation and commercialisation of health services.

EPSU’s staff and its Belgian affiliates participated in the Brussels ‘Our Health is Not
for Sale’ and #Health4All Action as part of the wider World Health Day mobilisations and actions. The message of trade unionists, health and social care professionals and citizens engaged in social movements being that following years of austerity, European governments needs to invest more in quality health care, reverse measures that restrict or condition the access to health and social services for all that need it and initiate policies which acknowledge that health care is not a commercial commodity and not for trading (as also called for in a Resolution of EPSU’s Standing Committee “Health and Social Services”, but a service of general interest, based on social and human rights.

After the demonstration, a Belgo-European Round Table event, against austerity, privitisation and commercialisation within Health Care and Social Services, took place. The Round Table organised by EPSU and the European Network Against The Privatisation and Commercialisation of Health and Social Protection focused on effects of commercialisation on the pay and working conditions of the workforces, working in these sectors, particularly from a trade union perspective, as well as on the quality, accessibility, affordability and continuity of service provision (see draft agenda below)

Speakers from Italy, Finland and France primarily focused on recent health care reforms in their countries putting in danger universal access to health care, the quality of health services and decent, save and healthy working conditions. Colleagues from Belgium, Ireland, The Netherlands and the United Kingdom also elaborated on the fightback against privitisation of health services, giving practical examples of campaigns which have challenged austerity measures in terms of improving work and pay conditions. Bolstering health and safety in the workplace, increase staffing levels (following years of staff cuts), as well as pushing to decrease workloads.
In opening the round table event EPSU General Secretary Jan Willem Goudriaan said: “It is important that we have high-quality health and social care services, which are affordable and accessible for all European citizens. After years of debilitating austerity measures, here needs to be greater public investment in healthy and safe working conditions, adequate numbers of well qualified staff and good staff-patient ratios. We also need to continue to fight against Free Trade Agreements such as CETA or TiSA that would push the commercialisation and marketisation of health and social care to the detriment of the patients and the workforce.”

The round table also profiled campaigns where trade unions, the health professionals and the general public had mobilised to push for better resourced health care. It also presented of organisational and education tools now available which can help health and care workers campaign effectively against austerity measures and better make the case for better staffed and funded public health services.

Nick Crook, UNISON’s Coordinator of European Affairs, informed attendees that trade union-led campaign’s in England have ‘beaten back attempts to privatisation NHS hospitals. These campaigns have seen ‘more and more people taking to the streets in support of health unions and the NHS’, continued the union representative. He also pointed out that by engaging in detailed procurement activities and threatening private contractors with legal actions which would force the private health operators to reveal details of their contracts, had also slowed the privitisation process, as contractors often back away when their proposals are scrutinised in detail and it is clear that their plans are bad for health workers and bad for the health service.

Paul Bell, SIPTU’s Divisional Organiser Health Division, shared details of the successful union-led campaign which halted the privitisation of the Irish Ambulance Service and started to address the severe understaffing of about 25% (by not having replaced and recruited staff anymore due to budget restrictions for over 4 years) that had in particular affected the service delivery in rural areas. Bell said that the general public were impressed by unions taking action to protect and defend a public service, rather than focusing on their traditional activities. The fight against the privitisation of the ambulance service also involved detailed examination of health service regulators reports, which enabled unions to show that
the government’s privatisation plans would have a negative impact on the health service and health workers.

Other colleagues that spoke on behalf of EPSU affiliates were Enzo Bernardo, Coordinator European and International Affairs, FP-CGIL, Italy, Marjut McLean, Vice-President, Tehy, Finland, Johan Forbelets, LBC-NVK, Belgium and Jan Schriefer, Members’ Parliament, FNV Zorg and Welzijn. Hélène Dispas and France Defrenne from the Fédération des Maisons Médicales, Belgium added evidence from the perspective of health service users.

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