

## 2. BRIEFING

# Solidarity

In the lead up to the next Congress in June 2019, EPSU is producing a series of briefings that focus on some of the main areas of work. Each briefing will provide an overview of EPSU's recent activities and will highlight the expected developments and challenges to be faced over the next few years.









Solidarity is a core area of our joint European trade union work. There are common elements to many of the actions of public service unions as we fight for better pay and working conditions or when we defend trade union rights or protest against privatisation and attacks on public services.

Any expression of solidarity is welcomed by unions as they see they are not alone and that their actions are part of a common struggle. It can be a real boost to their campaign when EPSU, its affiliates and other trade union organisations, not only send messages of support but also messages of protest to companies, employers and governments.

This briefing gives examples of our solidarity work in recent years. There have been some successes and effective coordination. There is the potential to do a lot more. If we can boost the number of affiliates who join solidarity actions we can help strengthen our movement over the next Congress period.

**Jan Willem Goudriaan**  
EPSU General Secretary





# Solidarity

## Recent activity

- ✓ **Major coordination of solidarity during public sector dispute in Denmark**
- ✓ **Interventions at national local, and company level on behalf of affiliates in a wide range of countries**
- ✓ **Continuing support and specific actions for affiliates under sustained pressure such as in Turkey**

Solidarity is a fundamental element of trade unionism and central to the work of international trade union organisations like EPSU and its sister organisation at global level, Public Services International (PSI). It can take many forms with a simple message to unions involved in a local dispute to solidarity coordinated by EPSU to get affiliates and other trade unions involved in supporting members in a major conflict.

As well as many messages to its own affiliates and other public service unions, EPSU often takes up the issues through letters of protest to companies, employers, governments and international institutions.

A simple solidarity message can have a positive impact on the workers taking action, knowing that they have the support of the wider union movement. This can be particularly important in countries where trade unions find it difficult to mobilise. While sending letters of protest can help by putting employers and governments in the spotlight, so that a local or national dispute suddenly has an international profile.

2018 has already provided many examples of solidarity action from EPSU involving a wide range of issues from a local dispute over flexible leave arrangements in **Ireland** to a major challenge to a national collective bargaining system in Denmark (see below) and everything in between relating to pay (**Romania**), retirement age (**Croatia**), public investment (**Ukraine**), trade union rights



(Slovenia), working time (European Parliament), fringe benefits (Hungary) and dismissals (Greece).

In the first half of the year there were also public sector-wide actions in Slovenia, Greece and France, where an EPSU delegation joined a national demonstration in Paris. There were also significant mobilisations in the care sector where it is often difficult to build union organisation. EPSU sent messages of support to the united unions taking action in the eldercare sector in France and solidarity greetings to the three unions coordinating their strikes in private home care companies in the Basque region of Spain.

### Coordinating solidarity – Denmark

One of the most important mobilisations in recent years came in early 2018 when all EPSU's affiliates in Denmark were involved in a public sector-wide dispute.

Following the failure of the employers to make an acceptable offer in the normal bargaining process for a three-year agreement, the trade unions gave notice of targeted strike action. The employers' response was to threaten a massive lockout across the public sector. The unions saw this as a guise to get the government directly involved in the dispute thereby undermining the Danish system of collective bargaining.

While the Danish public services unions mobilised, bringing together over 10000 shop stewards for a mass meeting, EPSU coordinated solidarity among its affiliates with many responding quickly with short written statements or video messages. The Danish unions said it was a real boost to their local activists to read and see all these messages coming from across Europe and further afield. The dispute was eventually resolved without recourse to strikes or lockouts and with the unions securing an 8.1% pay increase over three years.



### Trade union rights

Attacks on trade union rights and, in particular, the right to strike, are of major concern to EPSU. In recent years EPSU has shown its support to unions campaigning against the Trade Union Bill in the UK, union actions in Italy in protest at the transfer of forestry workers to the Carabinieri, effectively denying this group of workers the right to strike, and the campaign against labour code changes in Lithuania. EPSU has also supported its sister federation, ETF, in its campaign against the threat to the right to strike in air transport at European level.

### Intervening with governments, employers and companies

EPSU has taken up issues on behalf of affiliates by directly contacting national governments, ministries, public sector

employers and companies as was the case, for example, in 2017 where EPSU intervened on behalf of affiliates in [Serbia](#), [Romania](#) and [Georgia](#), including at company level in [Hungary](#).

There have been several examples of solidarity with the Ukraine in recent years relating to the [conflicts](#) in the East of the country, a call for [support](#) for the trade union movement there following violence in Kiev, letters to the government over proposed [health reforms](#) and to both the government and the European institutions over implementation of the country's [Association Agreement](#) with the European Union.

### **Long-term solidarity - Turkey**

Trade unions have long been under the cosh in Turkey but things have worsened significantly following the failed coup in 2016 and the government's subsequent clampdown. Tens of thousands of public service workers have faced summary sackings without the government following any proper procedures.

EPSU has followed developments closely, attending the [congress](#) of the KESK public services confederation in July 2017, supporting protests against other [arbitrary actions](#) by the government and taking part in a [delegation](#) that met with trade unions, political parties and government officials in May. EPSU and its affiliates have also contributed to the [solidarity fund](#) set up by the ETUC and ITUC. There was also solidarity for unions taking [strike action](#) to defend their members' pay and conditions despite the repression.

### **Beyond Europe**

EPSU also gives support to public service trade unions outside of Europe, backing initiatives taken by PSI in relation, for example, to [Korea](#), [Palestine](#), [Nigeria](#) and [Liberia](#), where an EPSU delegation visited the Liberian embassy in Brussels.

### **More information**

EPSU's solidarity activities are regularly updated in the solidarity section of EPSU's website which is highlighted as a priority area on the home page.

#### **Main priorities**

- ✓ **Strengthen and improve solidarity coordination – the Danish example indicates what can be done. There is potential to do much more by increasing the participation of affiliates in solidarity actions**
- ✓ **Maintain support for affiliates that are under sustained attack – particularly in Turkey**
- ✓ **Ensure better follow-up to show the results of affiliates' actions and the support they receive**

The **European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU)** brings together trade unions from across Europe. Our eight million members work in local, regional and national government and European administration; health and social services and energy, waste and water.

EPSU works to influence the policies and decisions of employers, governments and European institutions that affect public service workers, their families and communities. We mobilise for action and change and are committed to achieving another, social Europe.

Improving workers' rights and pay and conditions by strengthening collective bargaining and defending the right to strike are core to our work.

EPSU is the European region of the global public services federation PSI and is a member of the European Trade Union Confederation.

By sitting down with employers in the European social dialogue in electricity, hospitals and health services, local and regional government and central government administrations, EPSU negotiates best practice agreements that improve the working lives of public service workers and ensure quality services for citizens.

Women represent the majority of our members and gender equality is at the heart of everything we do. From negotiating with employers on women's rights in the workplace to exposing the scandal of the gender pay gap, EPSU is taking action for real equality.

EPSU fights against tax avoidance by the wealthy and multinationals that undermines our public finances. We are making the case for cast-iron exclusions of public services from international trade deals and we stand up for the rights of migrants, both in the workplace and in the services our members deliver.

EPSU provides a platform for our members to regularly share good practices in organising, recruitment and campaigning.

We campaign for well-funded public services and our members know that the services they deliver are not a cost to society but an investment in our communities. We're taking that message to the heart of Europe.





**EPSU is the European Federation of Public Service Unions.** It is the largest federation of the ETUC and comprises 8 million public service workers from over 260 trade unions across Europe. EPSU organises workers in the energy, water and waste sectors, health and social services and local, regional and central government, in all European countries including the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood. It is the recognised regional organisation of Public Services International (PSI). For more information please go to: [www.epsu.org](http://www.epsu.org)