



Pay and staffing: six months of action by health and social care unions

Serious staff shortages are affecting the provision of health and social services across Europe and EPSU affiliates have been taking action in response. This is a long-term issue but has come to the fore since the COVID pandemic and over the past six months many EPSU unions in the sector have been negotiating, campaigning and mobilising to secure increased funding, more jobs and better pay and conditions.

After more than a decade of austerity and low investment, the health and social services (HSS) sectors in many countries face both severe understaffing and difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff due to poor pay and working conditions, increased stress and long working hours. These issues were outlined in [policy brief](#) from the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies.

In 2020 EPSU [warned](#) that the EU faces a shortage of one million health workers, including 600,000 nurses. The figures at national level can be stark. In the UK, the RCN nursing union published [findings](#) from a survey of its members which showed that staffing levels on 83% of nurses' last shift was not sufficient to meet the needs of patients, up from 73% in 2020. While the UNISON public services union [found](#) that 97% of workers in the care sector say that their employer is currently experiencing staffing shortages due to burnout, overwork and low pay.

In France a survey by the CFDT Santé Sociaux health and social care union showed similar concerns with understaffing while returning to European level a [survey](#) commissioned by the Federation of European Social Employers, EPSU's counterpart in care, found that 85% of social services employers facing unfilled job positions. The joint EPSU-Social Employers project, FORESEE, suggests shortages are due to the sector's poor pay, difficult working conditions and precarious short contracts, leading to an inability to recruit and retain workers.

After the innumerable [sacrifices](#) that HSS workers have made in the past two years, it is little wonder that EPSU affiliates in these sectors have mobilised to force governments and employers to address the staff shortages, low wages and poor working conditions that undermine the provision of care and other services. The need to win better pay for members has become even more urgent with the increase in inflation that Europe has experienced this year.

A busy start to the year

In December 2021 - January 2022 unions in Austria, Italy, the Netherlands and Germany secured pay rises, working time reductions and better working conditions while French unions took action over pay:

- **Austria** – Trade unions GPA and vida secured a 3.2% pay increase for childcare workers and a 37-hour working week for private health and social care workers as part of a long-running campaign to tackle overwork in the sectors.
- **Italy** – The FP-CGIL, FISASCAT-CISL and UILTUCS federations signed a three-year agreement covering 50,000 HSS workers employed by church-based providers, providing pay increases, better maternity leave and sick child leave, and capping the use of fixed-term contracts.
- **Netherlands** – The FNV trade union negotiated a three-year agreement for 100,000 mental health workers with a 9% pay rise and improvements to call-out and rest arrangements.
- **Germany** – Public services union ver.di negotiated new provisions for student midwives which cover tuition fees and the right to 30 days' leave and which the union argues are vital for increasing recruitment to the sector.
- **France** – the CGT Santé health trade union organised a national mobilisation to protest over poor wages and underfunding in the HSS sectors and the UNSA, FO and CFDT confederations organised a national strike of technical and administrative staff in HSS due to these workers not having received pay improvements foreseen by the “Ségur” agreement of 2020.

February – further action and agreements

EPSU affiliates in Greece, Germany Austria, Slovenia and Ireland were involved in disputes over pay, working conditions and understaffing, while workers in the Netherlands and Wales saw improvement to pay and conditions:

- **Greece** – the ADEDY civil service federation organised a day of action and work stoppage in the health sector, demanding an increase in funding for the health service in order to recruit more permanent staff and transfer temporary staff contracts to permanent status.
- **Germany** – ver.di organised warning strikes in the statutory health insurance providers, AOK and BARMER, to put pressure on the employers to raise wages for their 75,000 workers. The union also affirmed its commitment to improving work conditions, wages and contracts of workers in social care and early years education.
- **Austria** – private services union vida called for a reduction in workloads, improvements in pay and more investment in personnel and infrastructure as it began negotiations with the group of religious hospitals. Later, in the month it joined younion, GÖD, GPA and the ÖGB confederation in demonstrations across Austria to push for increased funding for health and long-term care as part of a “health offensive”.
- **Slovenia** – health workers went on strike over the government going back on its commitment to negotiate on pay.
- **Ireland** – a strike by Irish hospital pharmacists over pay was called off as the dispute was referred to the Labour Court.

- **The Netherlands** – the FNV and other unions negotiated new agreements for hospital and general practice workers, with increases in wages, improvements to working time and training, and end of year bonuses.
- **United Kingdom** – Care workers in Wales were awarded a £1000-bonus and a living wage as the Welsh government sought to address the serious staffing crisis.
- **Italy** – the FP-CGIL public service federation put forward a series of measures covering training, recruitment and better pay to address the problem of understaffing in healthcare.

A wave of protests and strikes in spring

March, April and May saw action taken by unions in Austria, Belgium, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands where, along with Bulgaria agreements covering health and social care workers were negotiated.

- **Spain** – unions in the CCOO confederation organised a protest over the refusal of employer associations in the care sector to update salaries in line with the collective agreement.
- **Netherlands** – FNV members in the youth care sector were involved in a day of strike action to demand measures to address workloads, recruitment and retention.
- **Italy** – the three public service federations, FP-CGIL, CISL-FP and UIL-FPL, organised a day of action across the country to put pressure on the government to improve pay and tackle understaffing.
- **The Netherlands** – the FNV, NU'91 and other unions won pay rises for many public sector workers, including in nursing, care homes, home care, youth care and disability care. The agreements, covering almost 700,000 workers, included provisions to tackle excessive workloads and to improve working conditions.
- **Bulgaria** – the CITUB and Podkrepa confederations signed a new collective agreement with the ministry of health that provided for pay increases for doctors and nurses.
- **Greece** – ADEDY called a one-day national strike to demand public sector pay increases after 13 years of no pay rises and inflation at a 25-year high.
- **Germany** – after a series of strikes, ver.di negotiated an agreement with local government employers on behalf of around 330,000 early years education and social services workers which provided for new monthly allowances, more days and changes to pay scales to allow workers to make faster progress up the wage ladder, among others.
- **Finland** – following industrial action in local government, JHL and Jyty endorsed a proposal from the conciliation committee which saw increases in wages and a five-year wage development programme aimed at tackling staff shortages and pay gaps. However, the TEHY and SuPer nurses' unions rejected the proposal as not sufficient to address the urgent staffing problems. They therefore continued their bans on overtime and shift changes.
- **Austria** – healthcare unions continued with their "health offensive" through rallies across the country calling for better pay and conditions in order to tackle staffing shortages.
- **Ireland** – SIPTU, Fórsa and INMO organised a joint demonstration in Dublin to highlight the need for better pay and respect for workers in the non-profit community and health services sector.
- **Georgia** – after several weeks of conflict, rallies and the threat of strike action, the HSMCTU health union, with the support of the GTUC confederation, secured an agreement from the Ministry of Health that it would not introduce a 12-hour work schedule for paramedics. The Ministry also agreed to remunerate employees' overtime work and to discuss pay rises.
- **Belgium** – public sector unions organised a strike to demand wage rises to keep up with inflation, investments in public services and recruitment to make up for staff shortages.

Already an eventful summer

June and July have seen new agreements being reached at a European level and in Finland, Germany, Italy and Norway while action on pay took place in Ireland, France, Portugal and Spain.

- **Europe** – EPSU and HOSPEEM, the European Hospital and Healthcare Employers’ Association, signed a new framework agreement on hospital recruitment and retention on 1 June.
- **Italy** – the FP-CGIL, CISL-FP and UIL-FPL federations negotiated a three-year agreement covering almost 550,000 workers in public healthcare which includes higher pay, a new job classification system and improvements to remote working and leave provisions.
- **Norway** – health unions negotiated a new agreement that increases the minimum annual salary and made progress on ensuring more full-time contracts and increases to payments for late shifts and weekend work.
- **Ireland** – public sector unions rejected the government’s proposed pay rises to address the surge in inflation as falling well below cost of living increases in both 2021 and 2022.
- **France** – there was a day of action in health care calling for the improvement of working conditions in the healthcare sector and to protest staff shortages and further personnel cuts.
- **Spain** – public service federations in the CCOO and UGT confederations renewed their call for the government to enter into negotiations over pay and conditions for public sector workers, rejecting the unilateral 2% pay increase as inadequate. While there was good news in the residential care sector where a court ruled that companies had to apply the sector collective agreement and increase pay by 6.5%.
- **Germany** – after 11 weeks of strike action and more than 25 days of negotiations, ver.di and the six university hospitals in North Rhine Westphalia have agreed on the key points for a collective agreement that addresses excessive workloads and understaffing.
- **Finland** – trade unions JHL, TEHY, SuPer and Jyty agreed a new two-year collective agreement in private health care, with a general 2% increase on 1 October 2022 and a 1.9% pay rise on 1 June 2023. They also negotiated an agreement in private social services for the same period but this only sets a pay increase for 2022 (2% plus 0.8% on minimum wage rates) with a pay increase for 2023 to be negotiated by 15 March 2023.
- **Portugal** – health workers took strike action, demanding pay increases, subsistence allowances and strengthening the health service in terms of both finance and staffing.
- **Ireland** – SIPTU, Forsa and INMO began a campaign of industrial action after the government refused to engage with demands for increased funding in the care, community and voluntary sector where workers haven’t had a pay rise in 14 years and pay levels lag well behind similar jobs in the public sector.