

To Mr Didier Reynders
Justice Commissioner
To Isabelle Pérignon
Deputy Head of Cabinet

Via Email: cab-reynders-contact@ec.europa.eu isabelle.perignon@ec.europa.eu

Ref:JWG/se/ Contact person: Nadja Salson, nsalson@epsu.org T+32 475 96 10 11

Brussels, 14 April 2020

Dear Commissioner,

On behalf of the European Federation of Public Service Unions, representing 8 million public service workers in Europe, most of whom are on the front line of the Covid-19 pandemic, I would like to draw your attention to prison services.

Across the EU's closed and open prisons, there are today about 300,000 workers and 600,000 people in their care. In several prisons, years of austerity policies have caused an acute situation of understaffing and overcrowding – most critically, according to latest data from the Council of Europe, in Belgium, Italy, France, Hungary, Romania and Turkey. Persistent or re-emerging violence in prisons has been a strong concern of our affiliates for the past few years.

The current pandemic throws into sharper relief the lack of resources in prisons and the tremendous pressure on prison workers. The fear amongst prisoners that they will be left behind and infected from unprotected staff has led to riots in Italy, Spain, Belgium and France.

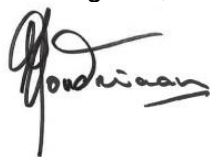
The pandemic has now reached prisons in a number of EU Member States, with a number of fatalities reported amongst both workers and inmates. Thousands of prison officers are on sick leave or in quarantine and hundreds of thousands of inmates are locked in almost 24 hours a day. Many workers are having to work long hours, increasing the risk of contagion, without masks, putting their life as well as the lives of their family and inmates at risk. The suspensions or limitations of visits of family, friends and lawyers to prisoners exacerbate isolation and tension. Social distancing or medical isolation of infected inmates cannot be implemented in overcrowded prisons.

EPSU has put forward 5 recommendations, summed up below, with a view to reduce fear and prevent the further spread of the virus in prisons: to protect workers, their working conditions, workers' rights as well as the rights of prisoners, and to reduce incarceration for non-violent offenders and vulnerable inmates.

I would like to invite you or members of your cabinet charged with criminal justice to an online meeting with our affiliates on 27 April, 2 p.m-4 p.m. Should this date not be convenient, I will be grateful if your services could propose alternative dates to discuss further our recommendations and to prepare for the exit of the sanitary crisis.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,



Jan Willem Goudriaan
EPSU General Secretary

Covid-19: 5 recommendations to release the pressure off in prisons

1. **Distribution of sufficient personal protective equipment for staff**, i.e. masks, gloves, goggles, alongside other preventative measures, screening for fever and lower respiratory tract symptoms of new admissions and testing. EPSU and other European trade union federations urge the Commission to use all means necessary to produce and distribute masks, including by increasing capacity or requisitioning (see letter [here](#)). Protected staff means protected inmates. Infection prevention measures are also necessary to limit or lift restrictions on prisoners' rights.
2. **Respect of working time**. It is vital that workers have proper rest periods in between duty. Overtime is a contagion risk factor. If it cannot be avoided, it must be limited and compensated in negotiation with the unions. Additional officers and healthcare workers in prisons, as long called for by EPSU, is a better and safer option than relying on overworked or retired staff.
3. **Reduction of detention as a preventive and realistic measure** for non-violent offenders and the most vulnerable inmates (elderly, pregnant women, high risk contagion groups) with social, healthcare and housing support where necessary. At least 9 Member States have opted for this measure temporarily, in line with the recommendations from the Council of Europe, UN and WHO. Migrants and refugees in detention centres, including EU hotspots, must be released with access to public healthcare and decent housing as called for by the Council of Europe.
4. **Communication and consultation**. This is crucial for workers' confidence and for effective social dialogue. Prison management needs to provide clear, factual, regular and timely information to workers and inmates about what is done and planned to be done, to alleviate the situation and isolate or transfer infected inmates. Consultation rights of trade union representatives, as long called for by EPSU, see [here](#), is an imperative to ensure that rights are respected and collective solutions found. It is reminded that the majority of inmates are from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, many of them have mental health issues, from a foreign or ethnic minority background, cannot read or write; female prisoners, a growing minority in some countries, are notoriously more isolated and require special attention. The protection of whistleblowers must be guaranteed see [here](#)
5. **Coordination and collaboration between health, labour and justice ministries** are paramount if the health of people, including occupational health in prisons and other places of detention and society is to be protected. Health in prison is an integral part of public health.