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Brussels, 31 October 2013

Decisions and plans of the Government of Cyprus concerning wage cuts and the deterioration of working conditions of nurses in Cyprus

Dear Minister,

EPSU, the European Federation of Public Services unions is concerned about the lack of social dialogue and negotiations on the proposals of the government for wage cuts and other attacks on the rights of workers. We ask you to withdraw these proposals and enter into negotiations with the trade unions.

We have recently been informed by colleagues of our Cypriot member PASYDY about already enacted and planned cuts of salaries and deteriorations of working conditions for nurses in your country.

- They informed us that the Government of Cyprus decided, without any preceding dialogue with trade unions and employers' organisations, to reduce all shift benefits of nursing personnel by 15% for night shifts and 35% for Sundays and public holidays, as of 1 January 2013.
- PASYDY also brought to our attention that in addition to these harsh cuts, on 26 September 2013 the Government of Cyprus proposed a law to the Parliament which, if voted, would abolish all benefits for evening shifts and it would also entail a further reduction, beyond the initial 15%, on night duty shifts and 50% on Sundays and public holidays as on January 2014.
- The recent deep cuts into the income of nurses – that would not only concern 3,500 health professionals, but also the living conditions of their families – would add to salary cuts all health professionals in the public sector to our knowledge already had to face since the crisis set in.

These decisions and plans of your government are a major concern to us and to our all our members and colleagues across Europe – even more so as we are witnessing similar worrying developments in other EU Member States –, amongst them about 3.5 unionised million women and men in health and social services. EPSU shares the shock and indignation of our Cypriot colleagues about decisions taken and planned without prior consultation of workers and trade unions. We fully share their concerns and support protest actions they might take.

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EPSU is fully aware of the very difficult financial, economic and social situation your country is facing since several months and about the demands formulated by the Troika in view of the Cypriot budget and public debt level. The role of social dialogue and social partnership, however, is one of the cornerstones of the European Social Model Cyprus subscribed to, the autonomy of the social partners in negotiating is a key principles of our social market economies. In our view both cannot simply be put aside and disregarded.

EPSU therefore urges you to reconsider your position and to revise decisions taken that harm your health system, that violate the rights of health workers and put at risk their health and safety and that have a negative impact on the extent of and the quality of care provided to the patients and users of health services. Reduced numbers of nurses in wards lead to more stress and to work overload. This in turn risks entailing more errors, more injuries, a higher failure to rescue and a reduced quality of care. EPSU recently has compiled evidence on the negative consequences of austerity measures on the health care systems, the health workforce and patients, in particular in countries under “Troika governance”, amongst them difficulties to access affordable health care services for parts of the population, lacking or non-affordable medication, an increase in mental disorders, a spreading of infectious diseases, etc.

Many health systems across Europe – and this already prior to the global recession caused by the financial and economic crises – were under pressure to deliver quality health services. The challenges health systems and health workers have to address stem from ageing populations entailing a higher incidence of chronic-degenerative diseases and more complex care needs, also with regard to long-term care, often tight public budget and staff shortages, at least for selected professions. We also witness and hear from our affiliates about an increase of work-related stress, of cases of burn-out and of the number of colleagues leaving their profession and the health sector – as one consequence of being asked to provide more for less. Health employers continue to be faced with the challenge of retaining qualified health workers and of guaranteeing to all of their staff healthy and safe working conditions.

Pay cuts as already enacted or planned to the extent this is the case in your country will have short- and long-term damaging effects on the Cypriot health care system as they will lead to de-motivation of health professionals, reduce the attractiveness of the sector and increase the risk that the health sector will lose the qualified, healthy and motivated workers.

Nurses play a key role for the good and effective functioning of our health systems. Supporting similar calls by the ICN and the EFN, we urge you and the Government of Cyprus not to take actions that will exacerbate an already difficult situation in the Cypriot health care system.

You will be aware that the European Parliament will investigate the work of the Troika on the programme countries and how policies are implemented. Further you will also be aware of the ILO study on restructuring in the public sector. It demonstrates that decisions that are not based on dialogue and negotiations do not lead to balanced solutions and have long term impacts. It would be foolish to ignore such advice.

EPSU not least therefore calls on you and the Government of Cyprus to return to the long-practiced and successful model of dialogue and prior consultations and



discussions with the social partners, including PASYDY. We ask you to apply this model to all issues concerning employment conditions, the labour market as well as professional training and continued professional development in the health care sector where trade unions and more in general social partners play and need to play a key role. We hope and wish you can take decisions for the benefit of the nurses and your citizens in difficult times and contexts for your country.

Yours sincerely,

Carola Fischbach-Pyttel
General Secretary
EPSU

** EPSU (<http://www.epsu.org>), the European Federation of Public Service Unions, represents a total of about 8 million workers in more than 270 trade unions in 47 countries across Europe. 60% of the members of EPSU's affiliates are women, in the health sector and with nurses and nursing professions this share still considerably higher and on average reaches a share of about 80%. EPSU is the recognised European social partner for the hospital/health care sector.*