



Public Service Day 2022: applause is not enough, change is needed

2020 and 2021 saw unprecedented levels of appreciation for public service workers. COVID-19 showed the world the real value of our work: we stood on the frontlines of the pandemic and delivered the services that our societies rely on for survival. People stood on their balconies and cheered; pots and pans became a symbol of applause. The actions were appreciated, but workers faced danger and exhaustion every day, knowing there was no other choice than to care for people.

As Public Service Day approaches, the applause and cheers are now a distant memory. The pandemic was another glaring exposure of the consequences of liberalisation, austerity and inaction. Critical staff and resource shortages left hospitals and long-term care facilities unable to cope with the pandemic, contributing to the shocking deaths that characterised Europe's pandemic experience.

Europe has returned to a version of normalcy for most, but the conditions that brought about these failures remain. The 'essential' workers who brought Europe through the pandemic have yet to see the cheers and appreciation translated into higher pay and better working conditions. As workers struggle to cope with lack of respect, trauma, burnout and backlog in hospitals, new worries are added.

The rising costs of everything from energy and rent to flour and coffee are on the minds of every European. The increased inflation being seen across the world is placing a tight squeeze on everyone – but public service workers are feeling it particularly badly. More than a decade of austerity – with pay freezes and even cuts – had left these workers in a bad place well before the pandemic. With inflation within the European Union set to hit 6.8% this year – rising to 9% in the United Kingdom, 9.6% in Serbia and 69.9% in Turkey – it is once again the workers who feel the pinch.

While it is true that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has exacerbated the growing cost of living crisis, European policymakers, governments and our employers cannot use the conflict as a scapegoat for failure to address longstanding problems of staff shortages prevalent across Europe. The reasons for the lack of staff are linked with amongst others too low wages and lack of recognition for the work done in service of our communities. Privatisation, commercialisation and austerity further undermined quality public services. EPSU and public service unions have warned of this since neoliberal policies became dominant. While proponents of these policies claimed that they would lead to greater choice and savings for the consumer, they have instead led to rising costs for the user and the siphoning of public money into the pockets of big businesses.

The ORPEA scandal is a prime example of these consequences of neoliberal policy. In early 2022 investigative journalist Victor Castanet published 'Les fossoyeurs' ('The Gravediggers'), a shocking exposé into the French long-term care system and the for-profit companies that dominate it. By giving profit-minded corporations responsibility for those in need of long-term care, the French government created the ideal environment for the mistreatment of residents, poor working conditions, abuse of public funding and a culture of union busting. It is just an example, there are too many! Now is not the moment to feign shock at the consequences of neo-liberal policies: it is time for change.



Public service workers want change. We have been on the streets and in industrial actions those last weeks for higher pay, better working conditions and more staff across Europe. Unless these factors are urgently addressed, public services workers will struggle to deliver the quality services they strive to provide.

And as we celebrate public services workers, we think of those active in the middle of armed conflicts like in the Ukraine. They struggle daily risking their lives trying to provide energy, water, and health services amongst others to their communities. These workers, and workers across Europe and beyond, are the people who keep our societies running.

Thursday, 23 June is UN Public Services Day. Let's use the day to celebrate the essential role that public service workers play in our everyday lives. Let's stand with public service workers so people can enjoy their human rights. Together we work towards another world – one where all are cared for, not only the few; a world where people and planet come before profit.