Austerity kills: the case of Ebola

(Press Release, 14 November 2014, Brussels) As the Ebola case of the Spanish nurse, Teresa Romero, seems to be stabilised, the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU), the most representative European organisation for health workers, starts demanding a proper response and that responsibilities are clearly defined and also actually assumed in case of problems or mistakes.

In Europe, only one person was infected by the Ebola epidemic. So far, the two victims of the disease who passed away had been infected during their work in Africa. Spain is the only country which has had to develop local protocols following WHO standards.

Policies meaning cuts in public health and reduced wages of public sector workers have heavily demoralised them. The lack of materials and training to deal with Ebola is the direct cause of Teresa Romero’s contamination. However, the government has already tried to put the blame on her. The protocols put in place were neither sufficient nor efficient as there was practically no training offered (hospital staff in Madrid only received a 30 minutes theoretical training!) and the protocols of health and safety where not distributed to the entire workforce until the first contagion.

Jan Willem Goudriaan, EPSU General Secretary, after speaking to the local union representative of Comisiones Obreras, Esther Quiñones, head of the local FSS-CCOO union from the Carlos III- La Paz hospital, stated: “our affiliates on the ground told us unbelievable stories, worth Hollywood movies. The regional government, the very same that wanted to privatise health, was offering three-week contracts without any dangerousness bonus on wages to deal with Ebola. This is just outrageous.” He continued by saying that “these workers are heroes, yet European governments continue to focus on austerity on health workers, tax inspectors and on those ensuring the social fabric of our societies.” She was accompanied with another member of the same union a worker representative, Manuela Hernan.

Many nurses and other medical staff in Spain earn minimum and middle wages and have been on pay freezes for years. Resources for their work have been cut. Therefore, they are exposed to a serious threat for their health, causing anguish to their families and communities, while others, most of whom have been part of the corrupted system that caused the bank crisis in the first place, still go unscathed. Now, they are expected to be in the frontline, but without any proper wage. EPSU has sent a letter to the European Commission, raising this issue and asking MEPs to do the same at the European Parliament. (see http://www.epsu.org/a/10889 and http://www.epsu.org/a/10833).

EPSU and PSI have done a joint statement (http://www.epsu.org/a/10832) in order to build a trade union solidarity fund. The Ebola epidemic has had a terrible toll on health workers.

EPSU will continue to work in the public interest and in the interest of health workers to make sure that austerity stops. The delegation of EPSU and the health workers visited the European Parliament and European Commission.

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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 265 trade unions; 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 Neighborhood. EPSU is the recognized regional organization of Public Services International (PSI). For more information please go to: http://www.epsu.org