

## Ue-Care: Trade union event in Palermo on workers' solidarity

### with migrants and refugees

#### Report

Amid anti-immigrant, far-right electoral gains in Europe, 150 workers, trade union leaders and delegates met on 26-28 September 2018, in Palermo, Italy, to put forward the perspective of workers dealing with migrants and refugees.

Participants were from EPSU's affiliates in Italy (FP-CGIL), Spain (CCOO-FSC and CCOO-FSS), France (CFDT-Interco and CGT Santé Action Sociale), Greece (ADEDY), Germany (Ver.di), Norway (Delta), Sweden (ST and SSR), and the UK (PCS and UNISON).

The 3-day event consisted of a panel with local and EU politicians, trade union leaders and journalists<sup>1</sup>, a conference dedicated to new research findings and testimonies from workers charged with the rescue, reception, healthcare, processing of asylum claims and inclusion of newcomers, and finally a visit to a reception centre (SPRAR) and a healthcare centre for migrants and refugees in Palermo.<sup>2</sup>

The event was organised by FP-CGIL and FSC-CCOO, under the umbrella of EPSU. It is part of a broader project to showcase a public service trade union alternative to the divisive politics on migration and "pilot" the start of a European network of workers dealing with the reception of migrants. As in a previous meeting in Melilla, Spain last June see [here](#), the objective is to promote European trade union solidarity with workers and migrants, which the EU leaders have failed to do, leaving it to a large extent to austerity-stricken Southern EU border countries to cope with migration. The lack of solidarity between EU governments in turn contributed to the resurgence of far right populism, not the least in Italy.

A statement, moved by FP-CGIL and FSC-CCOO, "*European Solidarity? To build a European network of workers dealing with the reception of migrants and refugees*" was presented and adopted at the conference. Reaffirming long-standing calls by EPSU and PSI for a human right-based approach to migration and asylum, the statement calls upon EPSU and its affiliates to support the setting up of a European network of workers with a view to share experiences and develop a positive, structured approach to migration within a common welcoming, caring and inclusive ethos that places the human being in the centre. It will be put for adoption to the EPSU Executive Committee on 6-7 November.

Throughout the event, the leaders of FP CGIL, **Serena Sorrentino**, and FSC-CCOO **Juana Olmeda** raised a number of essential points. They stressed the importance of trade unions speaking with one voice and providing a common answer to migration that is best framed as a structural process that requires structured solutions, rather than as a problem or a crisis. The establishment of a European network of workers welcoming migrants is part of the solutions. Ahead of the EU elections, building alliances with democratic forces across Europe and with citizens is essential to counter mainstream anti-migrants' narrative based on fear and artificial divisions between workers.

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission's DG Home and European Asylum Support Agency -EASO- declined the invitation

<sup>2</sup> All materials are available here <https://www.fpcgil.it/2018/10/16/uecare-leuropa-solidale/>

In Europe, the far-right exploits the politics of competition between workers' rights and market freedoms. It divides workers along citizenship lines, local Vs foreign population. Foreigners are not Europe's enemies, it is the market-driven ideology that is to be blamed for the weakening of the welfare state, not migrants. The unions must have the courage to propose different solutions based on human rights for all, solidarity across EU countries, and a structured framework to welcome newcomers. EU leaders must agree safe and legal channels to stop the Mediterranean sea turning into a mass graveyard, reform the Dublin rules, and encourage democracy at work, and equal rights. Migrants deserve a dignified treatment, for the trade unions to defend their rights is also to defend every worker's rights.

A human rights for all approach avoids the trap of pitting workers against one another, whereby some feel that something is being taken away from them and given to migrants. The unions are the best placed to engage in this fight. The root causes of migration which force people to leave their countries also need to be better explained and denounced.

The fear of an invasion of migrants does not stand in the face of recent falling figures of newcomers on the EU shores, whilst at the same time an ageing Europe holds no future behind closed borders. In Italy, with a declining population growth, if it was not thanks to newcomers, schools in some small islands will have to shut down. Migration is manageable, and is a cultural and economic asset for local economies.

The deterioration of working conditions and cuts in staff in public administrations, cooperatives creates a sense of false emergency. The workers that deliver on a daily basis support to migrants are willing and determined to do their job well, but they need sufficient resources and political support for doing what they are trained to do. In Spain, through negotiations, the unions have succeeded to increase numbers of workers in some migration services.

### **More information**

#### **Panel with politicians and trade union leaders**

The panel on 26 September was opened by **Giuseppe Mattina, Councillor for Social Policies of the City of Palermo representing the Mayor of Palermo**, and chaired by the editor of **La Repubblica Palermo, Enrico Del Mercato** with the participation of **National Secretaries of FP-CGIL, Franco Martini and Giuseppe Massafra, EPSU General Secretary, Jan Willem Goudriaan**, and **four** Members of the European Parliament - **Ángela Vallina (GUE), Elly Schlein (S&D), Andrea Cozzolino (S&D)** and (via a video link) **Cécile Kashetu Kyenge (S&D)**.

The MEPs welcomed the trade union initiative. They were proud of the consensus that was reached in the European Parliament on the revision of the Dublin rules and in favour of a fair redistribution of asylum-seekers across member states.<sup>3</sup> This stood in sharp contrast with the stalemate in the Council that focuses exclusively on border controls and fight against so-called illegal migration. The Parliament also recognized that the best way to fight illegal migration is to establish legal and safe channels of migration, not building and militarising fences or walls.

Ahead of the EU elections in May 2019, the support of trade unions and civil society is crucial to detoxify misperceptions against migrants (in terms of numbers, links with criminality etc). Trade unions need to be more active to prevent their own members from voting for racist, xenophobic political parties, it is shown that active trade union membership with progressive

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+REPORT+A8-2017-0345+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=en>

trade union leadership is a shield against racism together with union representatives at the workplace to ensure equal treatment at work and campaigns for access for all to quality public services.

**Conference with 150 workers and trade union delegates from Italy, Spain, France, Greece, Germany, Norway, Sweden and the UK**

The second day, 27 September, was dedicated to the results of new research commissioned by FP-CGIL and CCOO-FSC and first-hand experiences and insights from workers charged with the reception of newcomers. It was opened by **FP-CGIL Palermo General Secretary Giovanni Cammuca**.

In **Spain**, the study carried out by **Victoria Fernández Zubieta** finds further evidence of the negative effects of privatization in all sectors dealing with reception including reception centres for minors – bad working conditions for staff and poor quality services for newcomers. Outsourcing to private companies has led to artificial divisions between public and private sector workers. 25% of companies offer wages lower than the average salary and no social protection coverage. The worse conditions are found in migrants' reception centres with wages of €600/month. There is also a higher number of temporary contracts by 40-60%, and more overtime. Most private companies fail to provide training with 51% of respondents having reported they never attended a training course, despite 39% considering it necessary. The poor working conditions affect workers' physical and mental health. The lack of health and safety protection tools against exposure to risks of contagious diseases, high levels of stress and harassment (20% of workers report physical and verbal harassment) are common concerns.

In **Italy**, the FP-CGIL-backed study by **Beppe De Sario**, FDV<sup>4</sup>, shows similarities. In 2018, there are around 5.5. foreign nationals living in Italy, half of whom are working. Migration services are part of the Italian welfare system. The reception system is divided in three phases – first aid and assistance (including EU-backed “hotspots”), first-line reception in regional hubs and second-line reception in publicly-funded System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees (SPRAR) which hosts around 40,000 registered asylum seekers. The SPRAR is a network of local authorities and NGOs, consisting of small reception structures with assistance and integration services.

The research finds a lack of training and upskilling, of interpreters, and growing privatization (to the commercial sector) that worsens the quality of working conditions and service provision. Workers report an urgent need for relevant training, especially on migration laws, which are constantly changing, on provision of care, intercultural mediation, health and safety measures.

The system of migration services is very fragmented, without a stable framework that would guarantee access to rights and public services. Workers are often left on their own to find solutions, which increases stress levels and difficulties in building trust with the people they deliver services to. This affects the ability to work and quality of services. Workers often have to invest their own free time and resources to create a positive, individualised relationship. A new decree by Italy's recently elected populist and far right government aims to remove humanitarian protection (granted to a larger number of asylum-seekers than refugee status), criminalise migrants found to be 'socially dangerous' and those who seek to help them increases tensions as some workers are afraid of being more involved.

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<http://www.fondazionedivittorio.it/en>

The research findings were further confirmed by the workers involved in the reception of newcomers, including healthcare, security and rescue, unaccompanied minors' centres, social and intercultural operators, cooperatives, NGOs, and national administrations.

Albeit structural, organisational differences, the shared problems workers face are: low wages, understaffing, uncompensated overtime, lack of training and skilling, negative effects on physical and mental health due to stress and exposure to traumatic experiences, and outsourcing to private companies, which divides workers and worsens their working conditions and the services they deliver to newcomers, impeding their long-term integration. The lack of cooperation between the different levels of administrations was also underlined. A video produced by **PSI** was screened regarding six Tunisian fishermen, arrested off the coast of Italy, following the intervention of a Frontex-backed drone, who faced human trafficking charges after rescuing a stranded migrant boat with 14 people on board. PSI and FP-CGIL called for the release of the fishermen, including **Chamseddine Bourassine**, President of the **Zarzis Fisherman's Association**. Last year, the Association [was involved](#) in the fight against the C Star ship piloted by members of a French group Generation Identity which sought to "sink the immigrant boats and bring the people back to Africa."

Nadja Salson, **EPSU Policy Officer**, then highlighted EPSU and PSI's views on migration which indeed made their way to the European Parliament but not in Council. Despite EU leaders' recent endorsement of the UN-led Global compact on migration with references to public services and workers' rights, in the EU migration has never been so divisive. The solidarity elements of a common asylum and migration policy and revision of Dublin rules are blocked in Council, whilst the initial proposal for an EU-wide mandatory system of relocation of refugees in Europe has failed, leaving it to member states' own bilateral arrangements. As shown in EPSU's briefings [here](#), the consensus is on tougher border control and measures to deter, contain, push-back newcomers and outsource asylum responsibilities to third countries. A new draft return directive will undermine the fundamental right to asylum with an emphasis on (very) fast-track asylum procedures to facilitate return/deportation. These developments are condemned by EPSU.

The hostile environment towards migrants has contributed to the rise of racist crimes in Europe. It also has negative repercussions on staff dealing with migrants, that feel their job is devalued. Compared to a previous EPSU-backed Euromed project on working conditions in migration services, the situation is getting worse. What is new is the role of the EU agencies EASO and Frontex in the hotspots in Italy and Greece which have not improved the quality of reception. On the contrary, many reports indicate breaches of international asylum rules and mistreatment of migrants, as well as problems of cooperation with local staff, partly due to the lack of a common legal framework. Ahead of the EU elections in May 2019, the proposed statement sends a much needed positive message of solidarity. Despite their difficult working conditions, workers are doing what EU leaders are failing to do, building solidarity between workers across borders.

**Concetta Basile, National Secretary of FP-CGIL**, talked about the importance of public service work in welcoming migrants, emphasizing that migration is a process that has always existed and that will continue to be with us.

In a panel the delegates provided a snapshot of their respective country and views on the proposed statement:

**In France, Matthieu Fayolle, CFDT Interco International secretary** started off by welcoming a recent Constitutional court's ruling that recognises fraternity as a value and not a crime. The court ruled that the concept of fraternity confers the freedom to help others, for humanitarian purposes, without consideration for the legality of migrants' stay on national territory. It follows a legal challenge by a French farmer, Cedric Herrou, who was sentenced



to five years of detention and a fine of over €13,000 for assisting undocumented migrants. As in Spain and Italy, workers are also affected by understaffing and lack of adequate training. **CGT-Santé General Secretary, Mireille Stivala** said that the number of rejected asylum applications has increased. The union calls for quicker access to work, which is key to integration, and public services for newcomers, and to shorten the length of asylum claims processing. She agreed that the Dublin rules have failed to offer adequate solutions and need to be reformed. Both speakers welcomed the proposal to establish a network of workers to help find solutions, exchange good practices and involve trade unions in the debate on migration. However, the practical details for its functioning, membership and sources of funding need to be clarified.

In **Germany**, 1 million refugees arrived in 2015. **Romin Khan, Ver.di migration officer**, said that there has been a shift from initial welcoming to a hostile attitude. The German government promotes a return policy including of people who are already working. The current strategy of the government is let the working conditions in services for migrants and quality of services deteriorate. As a result, many workers quit their jobs, due to the bad working conditions, surveillance, and requests to carry out tasks that are not in line with their training and values. Ver.di is active in showcasing that hospitality is not a threat but an asset, inviting refugees to speak at conferences, to give them a voice within the union and highlight similarities between workers. As an example, in a Bavarian clinic, workers went on a successful strike against the deportation of one of their colleagues from Afghanistan. Mr Khan welcomed the proposed statement to set up a network of workers, cooperation is essential, especially for exchanging solutions to common challenges.

In **Greece**, **Stavros Koutsoumpelis, ADEDY General Secretary**, was critical of the EC-backed hotspots on the islands and the EU-Turkey deal which did not help improve the unsustainable situation. While the EU-Turkey deal lowered the number of arrivals in general, the number of newcomers on single islands did not decline, in some cases it exceeded 10,000 people in a single hotspot at a time. Greece is being treated like a Guinea pig by the EU, being left alone to deal with the crisis. It was only thanks to the commitment of workers that it was possible to provide services for newcomers. He denounced cases of "refoulement", which is forbidden by International and European asylum law, and forced returns, which leads to insecurity and pressure on migration centres and fuels racism and xenophobia. He emphasized the need for deeper studies of the situation and welcomed the initiative to establish a network of workers in order to speak with a single voice as trade unions and fight against racism.

For the **UK**, **Zita Holbourne, PCS Vice-President**, expressed solidarity with Italian MEP Cecile Kyenge (the only Black member in Parliament) who has been subjected to horrendous racist and sexist insults and threats, including from the Ligue politicians. MEP Kyenge has a legal case against 10 Italian politicians following their abuse. Recent developments on migration seek not only to deter new migrants but also to deport well-established communities of migrants or British citizens from ethnic minority background as has been shown by the Windrush generation scandal. Ms Holbourne welcomed the statement and the establishment of a new network which should also aim at fighting all forms of racism. She also called for international protection of people who flee the effects of climate change. Whilst they are the least responsible for climate change they are the ones who suffer most from it. **Narmadha Thiranagama, Unison equality officer**, herself a refugee from Sri Lanka, emphasized that years of austerity coupled with tough migration policies have generated a hostile environment towards migrants, which makes it harder for newcomers to live and for workers to provide services. She explained that members are divided and prevented from doing their job in an adequate meaningful way. For example, healthcare workers have to check users' ID before providing help. There must be clear boundary lines between public services -healthcare, education, etc on the one hand, and the police on the other.

In **Sweden**, **Maria Östberg Svanelind, SSR, International secretary**, criticised the shift, as in Germany, from a positive to a hostile attitude, from pride to shame, following the arrival of 160,000 refugees in 2015. The government's decision was not driven by a collapsing system of reception of migrants but by sheer politics that put an end to decades of welcoming refugees in Sweden. She denounced the strains on the reception system and praised the efforts of workers in handling the situation. Many workers are leaving their job because they are forced to do tasks contrary to their training and their values, for instance when asked to "return" unaccompanied minors to Afghanistan. She welcomed the statement and the creation of a European network for workers.

In **Spain**, **Maria José Marín, FSC-CCOO**, reiterated the need for better working conditions and better quality of the services to migrants and refugees and for putting an end to outsourcing – public administrations must be responsible for the reception of migrants. Unions have a key role to play to debunk the misperceptions about migrants and amalgams made between migrants and criminals. Public work also requires a common shared framework for the benefit of all, the local and migrant population.

The day ended with the address of **CGIL national Secretary**, Giuseppe Massafra, who explained the position of the confederation about migrants and against Italy government recent politics, and the conclusions of **FSC-CCOO National Secretary**, Juana Olmeda, and **FP-CGIL General Secretary**, Serena Sorrentino (see above), and the adoption of the Statement *"European Solidarity? To build a European network of workers dealing with the reception of migrants and refugees"*.

#### **Visits of a SPRAR and a clinic centre for migrants**

On 28 September, delegates visited a SPRAR "Comunità Urbana Solidali". SPRAR are small centres publicly run and funded by the government. They are seen as a good practice, where asylum-seekers are placed at the centre, enabling a positive relationship between the staff and the migrants, who are directly involved in the activities of the centre (training, cultural activities). Newcomers are able to stay in a SPRAR for six months, during which they can search for a job, do apprenticeship or attend classes. There are economic gains for the locality that hosts those centres. There are strong concerns regarding the future of the SPRAR following Salvini government's recent decree which puts an end to humanitarian protection, a form of protection for those not eligible for refugee status but who cannot be sent home, and replacing it with a special permits system that will limit eligibility to people such as victims of a natural disaster or those with a serious illness – see [here](#).

The clinic centre for health promotion is publicly run and open to documented and undocumented migrants. The doctor running the centre, explained how it was built from scratch, in the absence of any training or guidelines provided by the government. The centre is guided by an anthropological approach to health, which places the needs of the migrants at the centre and emphasizes the importance of cultural mediators who are the first contact persons for migrants. The workers emphasized the urgent need of training and of a system of exchange of information between workers dealing with the reception of migrants, in order to work effectively, reduce duplication (as migrants often change cities and end up doing the same medical tests several time resulting in unnecessary costs) and contribute to long-term inclusion.