



## **EPSU Water conference 22 March calls upon EC to put the right to water into action!**

On world water day, 22 March, EPSU organized a conference to pay attention to the global water supply and sanitation problems and to address the impact the EU 2020 strategy on the water sector and especially the workers. Trade unions from many EU countries participated as well as representatives from Russia and Turkey. During the conference EPSU called for the Right to water and sanitation to be put into action <http://www.epsu.org/a/7463> . Also EPSU presented the regulation for an European Citizens Initiative: [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/secretariat\\_general/citizens\\_initiative/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/secretariat_general/citizens_initiative/index_en.htm) as a means to bring this issue on the agenda of the European Commission. A group of participants was nominated to form an **EPSU water group** that will prepare both for the (two) World Water Forums (see below), as well as for the European Citizens Initiative that must be accompanied by a large campaign to mobilise people to sign. Colleagues that are interested can nominate themselves to participate in this EPSU Water group by sending an email to Jerry Van Den Berge ([jvandenberge@epsu.org](mailto:jvandenberge@epsu.org)).

Addressing the global situation on water supply and sanitation, EPSU paid attention to the meeting of the **Global Water Operators Partnership Alliance (GWOPA)** at the same time in Cape Town where the UN World Water Day celebration was held. The GWOPA was called to life by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, following advise of his Advisory Board (UNSGAB) on water and sanitation, in which PSI has a seat. The idea of Water Operator Partnerships is a direct result from PSI's call for more Public-Public Partnership as a means to reach the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) on water. Characteristic of a Water Operator Partnership is the Not-for-profit principle. This distinguishes it clearly from the usual For-profit PPP's that were (and sometimes still are) promoted by World Bank or Development Banks. Still nearly one billion people lack access to clean water and over two billion people lack access to adequate sanitation. These numbers should be halved by 2015.

In a direct video call from Cape Town David Boys (PSI) addressed the European Trade Unions to promote Water Operator Partnerships in their countries and to advocate for support at EU level and at Europeans that hold high positions in the World Bank and Development banks. Trade Unions and workers should get their own Public water companies engaged in International cooperation through WOP's on a not-for-profit basis, and at the same time link with their colleagues in developing countries to support them in providing a quality public water service for all. A Water Operator Partnership cannot be limited to a company management partnership but should be a real worker partnership as well, including a trade union partnership.

In the GWOPA meeting in Cape Town there was a recognition for the importance of participation of trade unions and civil society and their role in improving public water supply and sanitation.

**Trends in water services in Europe** were discussed. In Italy a referendum will be held, most likely beginning of July to stop privatization plans of the Berlusconi government. The Italian movement for water, in which trade unions participate, achieved to obtain 1.4 Million signatures to hold a referendum on this issue, where 500,000 were needed. The Italian government is refusing to set a date for the referendum, hoping that delay will reduce motivation and spirit in the water movement. On 26 March the water movement organizes a demonstration again in Rome. Last year 200,000 people demonstrated against the privatization of water in Italy.

In Turkey the awareness of negative effect of privatization is growing. Government has given concessions to water bottling companies that are increasing their sales of bottled water, which is the same water that public water companies are providing. Plans should be made how to campaign against bottled water and to raise awareness to the public about the harmful effects and exorbitant high costs and profits from bottled water. This is also the case in the UK and in Russia. In this respect there has just been released a video (<http://storyofstuff.org/bottledwater/>) that explains how detrimental bottled water is and how bottled water companies are misleading citizens about tap water.

Discussion followed about public and private interests in water. Conclusion was that water is a public service and that (local) government is responsible for providing a good quality public service to all. Whether this can be done by private or public companies should remain their decision. It is governments responsibility to safeguard long term public interests, because companies don't do this. Mismanagement is not restricted to either public or private companies. Therefore governments should regulate water services and protect this essential public service in the long term. Sometimes governments are facing a short term financial problem, and decide to sell their water companies (f.e. Greece) In the end the public (and workers!) are likely to pay for this through higher prices, loss of jobs or wage reduction. We should try to prevent local governments from selling their water assets, and remind them of their long term responsibility. Our goal as Public Services Unions is to protect and promote Quality Public Services!

A presentation by the association of public water companies was given. This underpinned government responsibility for delivering quality public water services. The public water companies think that profits from water services should be reinvested in the services and show their solidarity with companies in developing countries. They agree that a Water Operator Partnership can help to provide and improve access to water for all. Water companies should share their experience and best practices with companies in developing countries. The public companies are in favour of a benchmark to compare and improve their performance. The water sector is facing two main challenges: the blueprint for water that the EC has tabled for 2012 <http://www.euractiv.com/en/sustainability/eu-water-blueprint-pave-way-savings-targets-news-503433> , and the World Water Forum in Marseille 2012. At both occasions it is important to show the value and need for a quality public water service that must remain affordable for all. EPSU will follow the EU water blueprint and will send a delegation to the **World Water Forum**,

as well as the **Alternative World Water Forum in Marseille 2012.**  
(<http://www.worldwaterforum6.org/>) and (<http://www.fame2012.org/>)

In a presentation of Ngo's from the reclaiming public water network it was clearly shown how cooperation between trade unions and civil society organisations has led to results like the opening of the EU Water Facility (the EU Fund for development cooperation in water) for Water Operator Partnerships. It also has led to a shift in EU focus from private sector participation (PPP) to public-public partnerships (PUP): <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/activities/committees/studies/download.do?language=en&file=31831> . The importance of continuing to spread the message that PUP's are an alternative in improving public water supply and sanitation was underlined.

In the following discussion it was argued that costs are always used as an argument for restructuring, both in privatizations as in re-municipalisation. We should focus on Quality Public Service and workers interests. Question was whether the EU will force new privatizations? There are no concrete plans at the moment but privatization is a threat that is looming, legislation on concessions might open up the sector for competition. We have to remain vigilant. This was agreed. We cannot accept that private companies take over public services, that have been build up over years with public money, to take profit out of it.

A presentation was given on trend in water in Europe en the EU-neighbourhood countries. This showed a consolidation in the sector. It also showed that politics matter a lot for public water services and that there is a growing trend towards obtaining control over water resources by large companies, mainly the big water consuming industries. Trade unions should be vigilant on this issue. Methods being used by these companies are buying of large pieces of land or even buying glaciers. If control over water resources gets into private hands, entire populations can become dependant on private companies. This would give them immense power over people. Again this will impact on public services as companies have a short term interest and will not invest but take profit out of the resource. Therefore governments have to maintain control over water resources. Recently the European development bank has invested in water companies, instead if investing in infrastructure. This basically means that they are subsidising the company.

Further presentations were given on other **European policies** that are affecting the water sector. These are the Water Framework directive which leads directly to the blueprint for water <http://www.euractiv.com/en/sustainability/eu-water-blueprint-pave-way-savings-targets-news-503433> . Other policies that still are in an early stage are the flagship initiative on resource efficiency [http://ec.europa.eu/resource-efficient-europe/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/resource-efficient-europe/index_en.htm), that is calling on water savings (like the blueprint) as well, and the flagship initiative on new skills and jobs <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=958> , that seeks to match skills and jobs in this coming decade. These flagship initiatives will put pressure on the sector for higher efficiency, that may pose a threat to jobs. On the other hand they might create new jobs if investments are being made to develop new technologies (f.e. desalinisation) or to (re-)train workers for new jobs (f.e. in water resource management, or installation services for water savings or water reuse). As there are no concrete proposals yet, we will have to follow these flagship initiatives on consequences for workers.