



Croatian Trade Union of Nurses
and Medical Technicians

EUROPEAN FEDERATION OF PUBLIC SERVICE UNIONS
General Secretary

Dear Colleagues,

In this letter, we would like to express our concerns as well as to point out the extremely difficult situation in the Croatian health care system. Human and worker rights of nurses, doctors and all other health care workers are being increasingly violated on a daily basis.

Our entire health care system employs more than 30,000 nurses and medical technicians, but all official indicators show that the system lacks 12,000 nurses in order to meet the minimum requirements specified by EU standards and Croatian legislation. The entire system is organized in a way that minimum standards must be satisfied, which means providing high quality services to those in need, so that they might not feel all the flaws that exist in the system.

It is probably hard to imagine how 30,000 nurses manage to maintain health care standards at a level that is based on 42,000 nurses. The answer is very simple - frequent and excessive overtime work. The fact is that health care in Croatia must be maintained at a satisfactory level regardless of the lack of nurses. For this reason, the Ministry of Health, as well as all other healthcare institutions, are using different methods to make nurses work overtime - even more than our laws permit.

The nurses and medical technicians working in Croatia are very responsible and conscientious about their work. Throughout the years, they never once protested against working conditions because they had always put the needs of patients before their own rights. However, problems occur when nurses are expected to work overtime and sacrifice their own health, but at the same time, their work is not paid or valued.

As we mentioned before, excessive overtime work is not being paid. Nurses are expected to work as much as is required, but at the same time are only paid for their regular working hours. At this very moment, almost every nurse employed by Croatian hospitals has accumulated between 100 and 500 hours of unpaid overtime work.

The Ministry of Health recognizes this problem, but refuses to accept its responsibility, while our current Minister of Health has stated that the previous health ministers are responsible for the current situation. Meanwhile, a lot of overtime hours continue to be accumulated due to the inadequate numbers of nurses to meet the demands of the health care system.

In addition to this serious problem, which has forced many nurses to leave Croatia to find better opportunities in other European Union countries, we also have over 2,000 unemployed nurses who are desperately seeking work. All of this has happened because our Ministry of Health has banned the recruitment of new workers. These 2,000 unemployed nurses would certainly improve working conditions by assisting those currently employed nurses, who often fall ill from exhaustion or suffer some form of occupational injury.

Moreover, as if this is not enough. While nurses remain underpaid for their extremely difficult and responsible work, and are not paid for overtime hours, our current Government has decided to reduce their wages.

On account of various amendments to the law, the unilateral termination of collective agreements and regulations that prohibit the payment of certain acquired employment rights, the Government has managed, in just one year, to reduce nurses' wages to what they were 10 years ago.

The Government takes it lighthearted that nurses are working even more and the cost of living is increasing, whereas nurses' wages are decreasing and their responsibilities are growing.

In the past year, our union has initiated hundreds of lawsuits on behalf of our members. Such procedures are an attempt by us to defend nurses' rights. Those nurses, who dare to claim their minimum rights, as guaranteed by Croatian legislation, are being regularly subjected to strong pressure from their employers, in the form of mobbing, threats and blackmail. All of this is carried out to force them to withdraw their lawsuits, to get them to return back to work and remain silent.

Many of our colleagues have given up seeking their right to judicial protection because of the fear of being fired, but for those who have endured, the court has found a large amount of unpaid overtime hours.

For a long time, Croatian health care unions have tried to negotiate a new collective agreement that would regulate the rights and wages of all workers in the health care system. Unfortunately, these in fact are not real negotiations because we, like our members and colleagues, were exposed to blackmail and threats by the authorities. By introducing new laws, the Government has made negotiating impossible, presenting the unions with extremely unfavorable deals and offers, where unions had to accept the deals or otherwise workers would lose everything.

The Government has offered the health care unions rights and wages what they were 10 years ago. The Government has also 'offered' more unpaid overtime hours with additional pay cuts. In such negotiations, the Unions have tried to put forward their suggestions and even tried to propose an entirely new collective agreement, which states that the rights and wages should remain at their current level, without any drastic increase or decrease. Naturally, the Government has refused to comment or discuss such a proposal.

Given that the Government refused to negotiate with the health care unions, a social dispute arose that was supposed to be settled by reaching an agreement.

Immediately after conciliation attempts had failed, nurses and medical doctors announced that they intended to go on strike, since the situation in the Croatian health care system had become unbearable.

Such moves by the Ministry of Health not only violate the workers' rights of nurses and doctors, but also their basic human rights, since it prevents them from expressing their opinions and rising against injustice and violations of the law. The right to strike is one of the rights recognized by all international conventions as well as the Croatian Constitution.

In spite of everything, the Croatian Trade Union of Nurses and Medical Technicians and the Croatian Medical Union has offered the Government another opportunity for a peaceful settlement, because none of us wanted to go on a strike that would harm patients the most. Unfortunately, this attempt was also unsuccessful so we have been forced to take action.

The Croatian Trade Union of Nurses and Medical Technicians and the Croatian Medical Union announced that on Wednesday, September 18th our members are going on strike, which will go on until our demands are met. Since the strike began, our members have been listed, threatened, intimidated and pressured by the hospital directors.

Despite all the negative situations we are currently facing, we are happy to have support from our patients, citizens and many different associations.

We hope, that after reading this letter, you will be able to understand the real situation in the Croatian health care system, which is vastly different from the one presented to the public. Health care workers have not been able to seek help from their Ministry or their Government because it is these very institutions have been violating laws and have terminated collective agreements in order to reduce workers' rights. For this reason, we hope that this letter will help all local institutions as well as European and world organizations to understand better, why we have been forced to go on strike. We hope they will understand why we could no longer take a retreating position and why we have to use all proper available means to fight for our human and worker rights, because tomorrow we might no longer have these rights.

Yours sincerely,

Anica Prašnjak

HSSMS-MT President of the General Council

