

Public Services Welcoming Migrants:
Strengthening the role of public service trade unions in the protection of human
rights and delivery of public services to migrants, asylum seekers and refugees

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INTRODUCTION

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you today to our seminar “Public Services Welcoming Migrants: Strengthening the role of public service trade unions in the protection of human rights and delivery of public services to migrants, asylum seekers and refugees.”

The title of this seminar goes all the way back in 2010, when EPSU and PSI affiliates on both shores of the Mediterranean came together for the first time in a meeting in Bari, Italy. The issues that we raised six years ago remain the same issues that we face today.

We were deeply concerned with the situation of migrants risking their lives crossing the Mediterranean Sea, the precarious conditions by which they arrive in Europe, the protection of their human rights, the challenges they face in accessing public services and the challenges faced by public service workers in aiming to deliver these services.

Moreover, the so-called “refugee crisis”, which we should better call the refugee drama, is in reality, a humanitarian crisis.

Why the title “Public Services Welcoming Migrants?” Because we believe that public services are human rights. Every human being, regardless of national origin, migration and other status is entitled to the basic human rights to security, health, shelter, education, social protection, access to drinkable water and so forth. Public services must be there to welcome them in safety and in dignity, and to protect their rights.

OUR KEY MESSAGES

For PSI and EPSU, our policies have always been clear:

1. The Rights-Based Approach: States have their obligation to respect human rights and humanitarian law. On this, we have the normative framework within the UN Migrant Workers Convention, the ILO Conventions on Migrant Workers (C97 and C143), the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, and within Europe, the EU Charter of Fundamental Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights.
2. Promote quality public services for all. Migrants, asylum seekers and refugees should be able to access public services without fear, without discrimination and without restrictions. These public services include emergency response, health care, housing, social services, access to justice, job placement and integration services.
3. Along with this, we need to fund public services and equip them with well-trained and adequate staff working in decent conditions;
4. While we deal migration and its impacts, we must equally address the root causes. Countries, whether they are origin, transit or destination countries of migrants, must work towards achieving inclusive, sustainable, social and economic development,

promote fair trade and economic policies, tax justice, democracy and peace. The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals is a global commitment that we must all work for.

5. Recognise and address the gender dimension of migration, including addressing the vulnerabilities faced by women migrants, families and children. Of the 244 million international migrants in 2015, about half of them are women. Children comprise more than half (51%) of the total refugee population, estimated at 19 million at the end of 2014. Only few weeks ago, Eurostat made public that 10.000 children disappeared after arriving in Europe and being registered in an identification centre. We can only imagine what their destiny has been, but surely we should all be held responsible for that.
6. We must continue to defend trade union rights, to organise migrant workers and welcome them into our unions;
7. We have to fight racism, xenophobia and all forms of intolerance
8. We have to address unethical recruitment practices, including abolishing the charging of recruitment fees to migrant workers
9. We need to tackle the exploitation, smuggling and trafficking of migrants, protect the victims and preserve their rights; and
10. We support safe and legal channels for regular migration, and allow for safe passage and reception of asylum seekers and refugees.

SECURITY, OUTSOURCING AND PRIVATISATION OF REFUGEE POLICY

In the past years and more recently in the past months, governments continue to fail in providing a comprehensive and rights based response to migration and asylum. The disaster of such a policy is evident in the EU. The ambiguity, present in some narratives, that refugees and terrorists are the same is very dangerous and creates fear. The idea that EU is a fortress that needs to be protected with walls, fences and patrolling of the coasts is feeding the growth of racism and xenophobia. The attempt to contain the arrival of refugees through a fake division that classifies people into different categories, such as, economic migrants, legal migrants, Syrian, other nationalities, genuine refugee, and even the use of the term illegal, is simply inhumane and can create a “competition” among the desperate as to who can acquire the rights.

We have warned against the strong orientation towards security and border control, which are ineffective and costly. Yet this continues to be the dominant approach. The recently launched NATO operations in the Aegean Sea are geared towards detection and returns. Policies to manage the borders meant further securitisation and clamping down of borders thereby preventing safe passage of refugees and creating crises on the border regions. Within the EU-established hotspots, reception and processing of asylum claims have been slow, while returns of so-called “failed asylum seekers” are intensified.

We strongly criticise the decisions taken last week on the EU-Turkey negotiations for a Joint Action Plan on Refugees. Along with the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), we believe that those decisions lack humanity and are in violation of international refugee law and EU Treaties. Approaching refugee resettlement through a “one-in, one-out” deal is grossly unacceptable. Treating migrants and asylum seekers as commodity for aid is completely unethical. Yet, Europe should have learned the lesson when the implosion of Libya showed the failure of the EU- Libya agreement and a flow of refugees, previously

detained in the concentration centres in the Libyan desert crossed the Mediterranean in the attempt to reach Europe. This is why on the 16th of March, there will be mobilisations across Europe to denounce these unacceptable deals.

The European Union is outsourcing its responsibility to international protection to its poorer neighbouring countries, not least Turkey with its dismal human rights and trade union rights record. While EU states remain in disagreement on how to receive and resettle the more than 1 million people who have arrived seeking protection, developing countries are hosting 86% of the world's 19 million refugees.

As we speak about the situation in Europe, we must not forget that human displacement is a global phenomenon. By end-2014, 59.5 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations. Disasters associated with climate change have displaced 27 million people each year between 2008 and 2013. If carbon emissions and factors contributing to climate change remain unabated, more calamities will occur, which could potentially displace more than 200 million people by 2050. Climate change, compounded by competition over dwindling resources such as food, water and fuel, contribute to increasing conflict and further displacement. We know from events that climate change, conflict and movements of people are intrinsically linked.

Meanwhile, with the failure of governments to fund services accessed by migrants and refugees, or with these services being the first to be cut in the name of austerity, private businesses have come in, raking in huge profits from the refugee crisis. The "refugee industry" is growing. Services such as reception, shelter, health, education, and even detention of migrants, are outsourced to private entities and corporations, creating a highly profitable industry, replete with many problems.

AGENDA OF THE SEMINAR

In these next 2.5 days, our seminar will tackle issues that are not only a concern to Europe and Africa, but of global importance.

By bringing you here, more than 50 participants representing 15 countries in Europe and Africa, we aim to have a collective discussion in order to strengthen cooperation and enhance the role of public service trade unions in dealing with migration.

Specifically, we will:

- promote the protection of the human rights of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees through enhanced access to quality public services,
- improve our trade union actions to better defend and promote the interests of workers involved in the delivery of services for migrants, asylum seekers including via the use of EU and international legal instruments
- provide practical examples of trade union actions at national, across borders and inter-regional levels, such as organizing, recruiting, campaigning and negotiating
- examine the scope for cooperation with migrant support groups, local authorities or policy-makers at local, national, EU and international levels
- assess latest policy developments at EU and International levels
- examine the involvement of private sector in asylum and migration related services

We have in our agenda a mix of panel discussions, a site visit to an asylum reception centre here in Brussels, group workshops and action planning at the conclusion of the seminar.

These are very difficult times that our world is facing today. What we are witnessing as the large flows of migrants and refugees, in Europe and elsewhere are symptomatic of the global economic, environmental, political and social problems that must be addressed.

Therefore, I encourage all of us to be bold, to be frank in our discussions and to be creative in finding solutions based on our common values and solidarity.

OUTCOMES AND FUTURE ACTIONS

What do we foresee as some of the possible outcomes of this seminar?

We aim to strengthen our collective position on the challenging questions and recent developments on migration and asylum;

We shall outline an action plan on the global issue of migration and refugees

We will build our input and engagement at the 19th September 2016 - UN General Assembly High Level Summit on Large Flows of Migrants and Refugees

Build the evidence base by encouraging affiliate-led research on the impact of refugee flows on public services. The report we will hear tomorrow on Turkey is pioneering in this respect.

In 2017, the International Labour Conference (ILC) will have an agenda Item on Migration. Our discussion here forms part of our preparations for this conference.

In this year's ILC, there will be a report to be presented on the Review of ILO Recommendation No. 71, referring to the "Revision of the Employment (Transition from War to Peace) Recommendation, 1944. ILO Recommendation No. 71 will be examined to reflect current context, needs and challenges, with a view to standard-setting, which is an ILO Recommendation. Conditions of public service workers who are at the frontline services in conflicts, emergencies, disasters and epidemics, must be included in this new Recommendation.

We will re-launch our Campaign Against Racism and Xenophobia, a positive campaign with common and consolidated messaging.

We will continue to address labour migration, its impact on public services, such as health and social services, in which our PSI Migration Project has generated excellent tools and materials that can be replicated.

Finally, in this year, as well, PSI is rolling out a global Right to Health Campaign. My recent appointment as member of the UN Commission on Health Employment and Economic Growth is a welcome development. Together with your contributions, PSI shall focus on the human right to health, the importance of well-funded and well-staffed public health systems, and decent working conditions for all health workers.

There will be plenty to be discussed in the next 2.5 days of our seminar. Our challenges will be huge and our resources are limited. But with our strong solidarity and our commitment to

workers' rights, to human rights and quality public services, we will overcome these challenges and come up shared strategies and actions.

I wish us all an excellent seminar and look forward to its outcomes.

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