

World News - N° 8 , 2003

PSI Steering Committee
Democracy and Public Services in Iraq
Re-building public services in Iraq
Who gets the contracts?
Making services work for poor people
World Bank Directors to debate core labour standards
Urgent actions work!
Safety and Health at Work
May Day

PSI Steering Committee

On 28-29 April the PSI Steering Committee met for the first time since Congress. The Committee is new in its composition: it is now made up of all the Vice-Presidents. The meeting reviewed all Congress resolutions and agreed, after in-depth discussion, to the actions and implementation proposals suggested by the secretariat. It was the first chance to have a detailed overview of the Quality Public Services Campaign: the planned approach put forward by Wendy Caird, the campaign coordinator, based on very wide-ranging consultations, was enthusiastically approved. There was a long discussion on follow-up for the rest of this year on the appalling trade union rights situation in Colombia. The Committee also discussed the serious financial situation facing many affiliates (and, therefore, PSI), expressing grave concern at the number of affiliates whose members have not been paid for long periods of time.

Democracy and Public Services in Iraq

The Steering Committee also adopted a resolution on 'Democracy and Public Services in Iraq'. This resolution reconfirms earlier Global Union statements, e.g. on the need for a strong role for the UN in the reconstruction of the country. It notes the reported destruction of much of the public infrastructure, which makes the delivery of essential public services extremely difficult. It expresses concern and anger at the impossible situation of health care workers, who had to use weapons of death to defend their patients and facilities against widespread violence and looting. It demands that the US government, as the main occupying power, delivers to the workers, public and private, the core labour rights. It also expresses grave concern that much of the reconstruction in Iraq has been given, in a non-transparent manner and against international standards governing public procurement, to friends and supporters of the US Administration. In other words, to firms in need of a stronger commitment to democracy in the workplace. Furthermore, it is a matter of concern that much of the reconstruction is likely to take place under the leadership of the World Bank, which has declared that democratisation is a constraint to privatisation because it can lead to political uncertainty. Finally, the resolution calls for the

empowerment of the Iraqi people and urges PSI to establish contacts with public sector workers Iraq. PSI affiliates are requested to bring this statement to the attention of their governments. Contact: mike.waghorne@world-psi.org.

Re-building public services in Iraq

Bagdad, whose public services were once of First World standard, has slipped back a hundred years. Thirty-five Bagdad hospitals are closed because of looting and arson. The three still functioning are reporting water-borne diseases. The water supply was deliberately targeted during the previous Iraq conflict, and was only at half speed twelve years after the first war. Today, water is an even bigger problem. As for electricity, not much is functioning in spite of heroic efforts from local public sector workers. 'Reconstruction will require a major rebuilding of the public infrastructure as well as productive private investment. The international community must ensure that this meets the interests of the Iraqi people and not private profiteers,' warns a joint Global Union statement. 'Concrete steps must be taken to ensure that public contractors and inward investors observe the core labour standards of the ILO, as well as the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, and that decisions about the long term ownership and control of public assets are taken by the people of Iraq'. The full statement as well as previous statements on the war in Iraq is available from www.icftu.org.

Who gets the contracts?

'Bechtel is honoured to have been asked by USAID to help bring humanitarian assistance, recovery, and infrastructure reconstruction to the Iraqi people', said Tom Hash, President of Bechtel International, Inc in a recent press-release on Bechtel's website www.bechtel.com. Bechtel will now begin meeting with USAID to start detailed planning for assisting in rebuilding schools, hospitals, water and wastewater facilities, irrigation systems, electrical power systems, ports, airports, roads, bridges and railroads. The initial award for this capital construction contract is US\$34.6 million, though it provides for funding of up to US\$680 million over 18 months. Funding is subject to Congressional authority and availability. For more information on USAID's reconstruction efforts, consult www.usaid.gov/iraq. For more information about Bechtel, which readers will remember from Cochabamba, Bolivia (skyrocketing tariffs and disconnections, followed by massive protests, violently suppressed by authorities), consult www.psir.org.

Making services work for poor people

The e-discussion on the World Bank's 'World Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People' is now well under way. PSI's Mike Waghorne has already delivered input, and so has Annie Geron from PSLINK and others. Other participants, so far, are from various NGOs, and from UN and government agencies, mainly in developing countries. One question that has come up is whether the World Bank will listen. It is clear that the more relevant arguments and the more critical mass this discussion generates, the more difficult it will be for the World Bank to overlook. It is therefore important that more PSI affiliates take part in the discussion. The e-discussion is monitored by Brendan Martin of Public World. Discussion topics are now laid down for the entire six weeks. To participate go to www.publicworld.org and click on the WDR 2004 to register. Background information is also available from the site.

World Bank Directors to debate core labour standards

The World Bank's board of executive directors is scheduled to debate the bank's role on core labour standards (CLS) on 6 May. As it will be an 'informal discussion', there is little chance that the debate will lead to anything more than some 'guidance' on the bank's future policies.

Nevertheless, it will be the first time such a debate takes place. The discussion will be preceded by a presentation on 'The World Bank and Core Labour Standards' (not in the public domain), given by staff from the bank's social protection unit. The bank is already known to have done considerable research on the union movement, and has also shown willingness to consult and discuss. However, there is always a risk that the debate will decide that the best labour market policies contributing to poverty reduction are those that eliminate 'labour market rigidities'. For details contact pbakvis@earthlink.net.

Urgent actions work!

Good news from El Salvador: The Salvadorean Congress has finally approved a law to oppose privatisation of the Social Security Institute and the doctors' hunger strike has been called off. The doctors' health is reported stable. The 'work strike' however will continue until President Flores guarantees that he will not exercise the presidential power to veto the law. PSI thanks the many affiliates who responded to the urgent action. The union reports that the letters of protest have been an important moral support for those on hunger strike and have contributed to this successful outcome.

Safety and Health at Work

On 28 April tens of thousands of workers and employers from Lima to London and Bangkok to Sao Paulo marked the World Day for Safety and Health at Work. According to ILO estimates, two million men and women die from work-related diseases and accidents each year. This is not only a tragedy for the workers and their families, it is also costly in financial terms. According to the ILO workplace illness, injury and death cost some US\$1.25 trillion in annual losses in global gross domestic product (GDP). For more information go to www.ilo.org/safework/safeday.

May Day

On 1 May workers from all continents gathered to celebrate the achievements of the trade union movement and to embrace the future.

In South Africa, however, the day turned into a nightmare as a bus taking unionists, mostly members of PSI affiliate, SAMWU, to a May Day rally in Free State took a wrong turn and plunged into a dam, killing more than 60 people. PSI offers its sincere condolences to the friends and family of those killed.

See the special 1st May page on www.global-unions.org for details of union events around the world.

Comments

Please email comments on PSI World News to psi@world-psi.org

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