

PSI World News - October 2004

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October 2004

Equal Pay Works!

On 7th-8th October more than 100 equal pay activists, including public service and education union representatives from across Europe, met at the ILO for the PSI/EPSU/EI Conference on strategies for achieving equal pay. A survey on the situation in Europe was presented by Dr. Jane Pillinger. Speakers included Mie de Vits, a Socialist Group Member of the European Parliament and former General Secretary of the Belgium Trade Union Centre FGTB, and Professor Marie Therese Chicha, a member of the Canadian Federal Government Pay Equity Task Force. The final statement and a summary of the survey results are available on the PSI website www.world-psi.org. The statement is a tool for lobbying governments, employers and unions to make commitments on achieving pay equity. It will also be used to lobby members of the ILO Governing Body at their forthcoming meeting in November, seeking to ensure adequate resources to implement the 2004 ILO Conference resolution on gender equality, pay equity and maternity protection.

"Stress at Work" Code Agreed

A pledge to combat stress at work was signed by European employers and unions this month. The voluntary code is designed to increase awareness and encourage companies to take action to reduce stress - or prevent the causes arising at all. "The responsibility for determining the appropriate measures rests with the employer", says the document. "These measures will be carried out with the participation and collaboration of workers and/or their representatives". Such measures could include clarifying company aims and the role of individual workers, or ensuring adequate management backing for individuals and teams and improving work organisation.

Korea: KGEU faces continued attack

Police have attacked and arrested union members during a rally held by the Korean Government Employees Union (KGEU). The rally was held to oppose a proposed Bill which, if it becomes law, will effectively restrict the right to collective bargaining and collective action. The Minister of Government Affairs has issued directives to ban the collection of KGEU union dues and solidarity funds, and is threatening financial sanctions against local authorities who enter into collective bargaining with the KGEU. PSI has protested to the Korean government, and called for the withdrawal of the proposed Bill.

Uruguay: referendum on water services

The people of Uruguay elect their national president on 31 October. Thanks to the work of unions, NGOs and activists, they will also be voting on a constitutional reform designed to prevent privatisation of their water systems, and to ensure universal access and citizen participation in the management of their water resources. The Uruguayan union in the water sector (FFOSE) developed a strategy to force this constitutional referendum. They identified groups in their country to help, and reached out to the growing international movement against water privatisation and commercialisation. The first step required collecting signatures of 10% of the country's electorate, which was accomplished in 2003. The national committee is now in full campaign mode: it has raised funds to pay for the 10 million ballots that will be used on this issue, and has engaged in awareness-raising throughout the country, with commercial advertising to help convince voters. We stand in solidarity with the people of Uruguay: a victory will set an important precedent in the global campaign to ensure the human right to water and to prevent the commercialisation of this fundamental public service. For more information see: <http://www.geocities.com/comisiondelagua/>

Help end the link between aid and privatisation

For years the UK government has promoted public service privatisation as a key condition in its overseas aid programme. However a recent government report noted that some privatisations "have worsened the standard of service received by the poor". There has also been considerable publicity about the millions of pounds which have ended up in the hands of pro-privatisation consultants (see item below). As a result the UK government is now asking members of the public to express their views on the subject. PSI is calling on supporters to respond - whether UK citizens or not - examples from around the world will help support our message. Email comments to the UK government at <<mailto:conditionality@dfid.gov.uk>> conditionality@dfid.gov.uk before 30 November 2004, and please send a copy to the PSI (<<mailto:wendy.caird@world-psi.org>> wendy.caird@world-psi.org) and War on Want (<<mailto:jhilary@waronwant.org>> jhilary@waronwant.org) .

Profiting from Poverty

A recent report from British anti-poverty campaign group War on Want, with support from PSI affiliate PCS, reveals how consultancy firms such as PricewaterhouseCoopers, KPMG and Deloitte Touche Tomatsu have all won vast sums to direct the privatisation of water, rail, electricity and postal services in developing countries. There are examples from India, South-Africa, Jamaica, Malaysia, Korea, and China, to mention some. The report also looks at the role of the UK government, claiming that it has directed millions of pounds from the UK aid budget to these consulting firms. At the same time, according to the Norwegian newspaper, Klassekampen (18/9/04), Ernst & Young sat on both sides or even three, in connection with a big Public -Private-Partnership (PPP) project in Norway. "The conflict of interest is obvious", says Hans Engelberts, General Secretary of PSI. For more information see <http://www.waronwant.org/?lid=8740>

World Bank Watch

A delegation of trade union leaders from over 40 countries spent three days this month trying to convince the World Bank and the IMF to stop pushing one-sided labour market deregulation. World Bank President James Wolfensohn stressed his determination to ensure that the Bank develops and builds upon its commitment to achieve respect for core labour standards, and stated that the Bank would implement no policy that diminished the influence of organised labour. The World Bank had moved a long way from the "Washington Consensus", he said, and now recognised that social justice was an essential counterpart of economic growth. He also acknowledged that greatly increased development assistance was vital to achieving the Millennium Development Goals. The IMF position was more doctrinaire, with Managing Director Rodrigo de Rato still claiming that labour market reform was very often a necessary part of achieving macroeconomic recovery.

India: Victory for Government Workers

The Tamil Nadu State Government has agreed to many of the demands of the coalition of government officials unions, which took strike action in July 2003 and then faced the dismissal of over 170,000 employees and arrest of 6,000 union members. PSI issued an appeal on behalf of its affiliate, the Tamil Nadu Government Officials Union (TNGOU), and after much pressure the government finally agreed "to take a magnanimous view". At a meeting this month it was agreed to restore union recognition rights: to repeal the Tamil Nadu Essential Services Maintenance Act, and to provide back-pay for over 6,000 employees who were dismissed and then reinstated after a Supreme Court decision. A state-level consultation and conciliation committee is being set up. These were all part of the demands filed in a case against the government by the TNGOU which is due to be heard at the November meeting of the ILO Committee on Freedom of Association. Mr. G. Surymurthy, President of the TNGOU, has thanked the PSI for the continued support from both the PSI South Asia office and the international. The next step is to negotiate improvements in terms and conditions for the government employees, he explained.

European Social Forum

Unions, civil society groups and activists came together this month for the European Social Forum. The event took place over three days, involving 20,000 people from nearly 70 countries in more than 500 meetings, listening to

over 250 speakers. PSI organisers were involved in six seminars, speaking on quality public services, water and energy. A record of the various seminars is available here: <http://www.fse-esf.org/en/meetingminutes.shtml>

ILO Help for Migrant Workers

The ILO has launched a new programme designed to tackle the job discrimination which affects so many migrant workers. The new programme will also seek ways of helping these workers (who number some 27.5 million in Europe alone) in their efforts to integrate into the societies where they work. The project - "Promoting Equality in Diversity: Integration in Europe" - is being implemented in cooperation with ILO tripartite partners and has the financial support of the European Union. See <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/inf/pr/2004/44.htm> for more.

The battle for strong communities

The Canadian Union of Public Employees, CUPE has launched a national campaign called "Rebuilding Strong Communities". Shop stewards and members throughout the country have been offered complete campaign material, including discussion guides and an information kit, consisting of a booklet about the need for public services; "Ten reasons to rebuild strong communities"; a sign-on letter for strong communities; fact-sheets; information on how to organize actions, lobby, and use the news media. The campaign was launched with a "Communities Day", calling for a vigorous, year-long discussion to rebuild strong communities. For those who want to read more about CUPEs campaign: www.communities.cupe.ca

IDEAS THAT WORKED

FEATURE STORY

USA: Democratic votes for public power utilities

Electricity supply began in Washington State in the 19th century, as elsewhere, with private companies. From 1891 municipal utilities began to develop in towns and cities, including Seattle. Rural residents became interested in obtaining electric light, power and water service under a similar arrangement, and a state wide voter initiative, supported by unions and others, won the support of 61,000 signatories, double the minimum required. Although the state senate refused to enact the law in 1929, it was automatically referred to a direct vote of the people of the state, and was passed by a state-wide vote of 152,487 to 130,901, becoming law in 1931.

That law provides for the establishment of municipal corporations that encompass elements of private corporations, rural electric cooperatives and municipal utility systems. A People's Utility District (PUD) has the basic business structure of a private corporation, with a board of commissioners who serve in the same capacity as a board of directors; it has the public interest benefit of a non-profit operation, with the low cost public financing methods of a municipal system; and it incorporates the area coverage concept of utility service, as practiced and promoted by the rural electric cooperatives. The law does not make this system compulsory: it enables PUDs to be set up on the initiative of people living in an area.

Today, there are 28 PUDs in Washington state, providing electric, water and/or sewer service. The majority of the population of Washington, more than 60%, is served by PUDs (28%), municipal utilities (21%) and co-ops and mutuals (5%).

A similar system was adopted by neighbouring state of Oregon, whose State Legislature passed an amendment to the Oregon State Constitution in 1931 which also allowed for the formation of people's utility districts (PUDs). Oregon now has six PUDs, supplying 9% of the state's electrical needs: four were formed in the 1940s, and two in the 1980s.

Source: Public Services Work! Information, insights and ideas for our future
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