

Speech notes for resolution:

Strengthening workers' rights and employment in Europe through collective bargaining, social dialogue and industrial action

Resolution 3, Congress Agenda Item 9, Wednesday 21 May, Afternoon Session

The core work of trade unions is collective bargaining and collective bargaining in the public services has been under sustained attack. National governments supported by, or under pressure from international bodies have torn up labour legislation, ignored collective bargaining procedures and agreements and imposed pay cuts and pay freezes.

The International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank and the European Commission have been behind many of these attacks and not just when banding together in the infamous Troika but also in other contexts as countries both inside and outside the European Union have sought financial assistance.

These specific attacks on the public sector are also often an element of a broader offensive against trade union and employment rights that have seen labour law changes in many countries – overwhelmingly for the worse.

We have sent our support and solidarity to many of our affiliates fighting back against these attacks, most recently in Greece, Georgia, Portugal and Croatia and in many other countries over the past five years.

In many cases we have seen coordinated campaigns specifically over public sector pay. The message, usually picked up with enthusiasm by the media, is that public sector workers are privileged and overpaid and, are therefore suitable targets for austerity.

Let's be clear – they are the wrong target. It is not the case that there have been so-called excessive wage developments in general nor in the public sector in particular. And pay cuts, freezes or further wage moderation are not part of the solution to the crisis. In fact, the opposite – we need to recognise the role that wages play in sustaining and boosting demand and so contributing to economic recovery.

Collective bargaining is the way to deliver regular and sustainable wage developments that protect workers' purchasing power and ensure a fair share of national productivity growth. The challenge we face in some countries is to reaffirm and rebuild collective bargaining arrangements. In other countries there remains the challenge to create proper systems of collective bargaining in the public services and not just vague consultative structures.

Effective collective bargaining ultimately relies on the right to take industrial action to support our demands and defending that right in the public sector will also require vigilance, lobbying and campaigning.

These are major challenges that will demand effective coordination and support from across our Federation along with close collaboration with PSI, the ETUC and the ITUC.

And in building and rebuilding our collective bargaining strength we can look to secure the improvements in pay that our members deserve and to address the problem of low pay that continues to plague parts of the public sector, a problem that is faced above all by occupations dominated by women workers.

Alongside this collective bargaining work is the lobbying and campaigning that many of our affiliates are involved in, with their confederations, to secure improvements in labour legislation and minimum wages. The strategies and priorities may vary at national level but as EPSU, and with the ETUC, we can voice our support at European level and confront the IMF, the Commission and the European Central Bank that persist with their demands for more deregulation of labour markets and downwards flexibility in pay and minimum wages.

We will continue to explore ways of exchanging information and possibilities to coordinate action on collective bargaining issues. This may be at regional or European level or within a multinational company.

While national affiliates may have different emphases, the general approach we have to key issues like the gender pay gap, or precarious work or training and jobs for young workers is the same and the message will be stronger and clearer if we say it together.

There are seventeen amendments proposed to the resolution which the Executive Committee is supporting and thank you to the affiliates who have put those forward.

There is just one amendment that the Executive Committee is recommending to reject. Danish affiliates want to remove the qualifying phrase “at least” from paragraph 11 on the general wage guideline and ensuring pay developments at least in line with the private sector. The Executive Committee argues to retain the original text because in some countries the challenge will be to recoup the cuts in wages in recent years and negotiate pay increases that may be just ahead of those in the private sector.

So, on behalf of the Executive Committee I ask you to support the recommendation to reject the amendment by the Danish affiliates but to vote in favour of all the other amendments and the resolution as a whole.