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Europe/Health service

European conference for the defence of a public health service

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There is an increasing fightback against the attacks on public health services and their funding in the countries of the European Union. These attacks, even if they appear to be different because of the diversity of existing health care systems, are coordinated by the institutions of the European Union (EU); the fightback, however, is fragmented. The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), which has the means to coordinate them, does not. Even information on the various methods used in the wave of health service privatisations is not available to those who are victims of these attacks and, in the best of the cases, circulates only among the specialists.

The first European conference for the defence of the public health service took place on May 7th and 8th, in the International Institute for Research and Education in Amsterdam. The statement adopted by the Conference is [here](#).

Facing an acceleration of hospital privatisations in Poland and the changes to the status of health service employees (replacing public sector contracts by private sector ones, making employees "individual entrepreneurs"), the Free trade union "August 80" [1] took the initiative to bring together trade-union, political and local activists, involved in the fight to defend public health services in Europe. In addition to the militants of "August 80", there were delegations of the National union of nurses and midwives of Poland [2], of SUD Santé-Sociaux of France [3], of the Coordination of Committees for the Defence of local hospitals and maternity sections [4] of France, of London Health Emergency [5] and Keep Our NHS Public [6] of Britain, of Europa von Unten [7] and of RevolutionÃr Sozialistischer Bund [8] of Germany, of the New Anticapitalist Party [9] of France, of the Socialist Party [10] of Sweden and Peoples Before Profit Alliance [11] of the Republic from Ireland.

The conference took stock of the state of attacks against public health services and privatisations which are speeding up in all countries. Rich exchanges based on activist experience made it possible to discuss the methods for a fightback and the political answers necessary. These debates also made it possible to collectivize information on the balance of forces in the various countries. For example, in Poland, after having decentralized and reduced the health budget, the government formed by the neoliberal Civic Platform (PO) and Agrarian Party (PSL) has just made vote a law obliging all hospitals in deficit "to become commercial" or to privatize themselves by the end of 2011; in Britain (cf John Lister's article), after three decades of neoliberal policies, the liberal conservative government is still hesitating to impose a generalized privatisation of hospitals, fearing to lose its legitimacy ...

These differences of situations and experiences re-appeared in the debate on the means of fighting to safeguard the collective and non-profit character of the health services: the comrades of the Polish free trade union "August 80" proposed, to prevent the privatisation by private health trusts, to form cooperatives of hospital workers and social mutual insurance companies in the localities, which would take over the hospitals themselves on a non-profit basis... The comrades from Britain, Sweden and the Irish Republic for their part mentioned experiences in their countries: the passage to non-profit-making cooperatives or private companies was a step towards privatisation! The discussion made it possible to clarify the different approaches and to reach a general agreement: whatever the dangers in the medium and long term faced by cooperatives in a society dominated by capitalist competition, and whatever can be the negative experiences of official management (bureaucratic and corrupt) of the public health service, what must direct the approach to the defence of the public health service is its social character, adapted to the situation in each country. From this point of view the approach of the comrades of Poland is by no means in contradiction with that of the comrades from Britain, Sweden or Ireland!

The participants in the conference decided to form a European coordination, to establish contacts and the co-operation with other existing networks which have similar goals in order to extend it to a large number of countries

and to all the popular organizations - trade unions, parties, associations and movements - which share the same goals. The comrades of the Free trade union "August 80" and OZZPiP committed themselves to organizing a forthcoming European conference in autumn 2011 in Katowice (Poland).

[1] The Free trade union "August 80" (Wolny Związek Zawodowy "Sierpień 80") was founded in 1992 by trade unionists from the underground unionism of Solidarity, opposed to the restoration of capitalism in Poland and determined to continue fighting in defence of employees' rights and interests. It has led some of the biggest strikes in the recent history of Poland (against the privatisation of the FSM Car Factory to the benefit of Fiat in 1992, in the Huta Katowice steelworks in 1994, in the KWK Budryk coal mine in 2007-2008, first strike in supermarkets in Poland, in Tesco...). Its congress committed the trade union to building the Polish Labour Party (PPP) to give workers political representation. It publishes a weekly magazine, "Kurier Zwizakowy" (Trade-union Mail), distributed free at more than 20 000 copies. Its miners' section organized the protection of the nurses' fight - the "white village" in front of the seat of the Prime Minister - from June 19th to July 15th, 2007.

[2] The National union of nurses and midwives (Ogólnopolski związek zawodowy pielęgniarzek i położnych, OZZPiP) was founded in 1996 by bringing together various regional and sectional trade-union organizations of nurses and midwives. It has 80 000 members (out of 200 000 nurses and midwives in Poland) and led a long fight (hunger strike, occupation of the place in front of the Prime Minister's official residence, known as "the white village") in summer 2007 to defend the wages of its sectors.

[3] The SUD National Health-Social federation (CRC until 1997) was founded in 1989 by militants expelled from the CFDT following the nurses' strike they led. SUD Santé-Sociaux took part in the construction of the trade-union Solidaires. It organises 89 trade unions and 15 500 members, growing steadily since 1996.

[4] This coordination was created in April 2004 on the initiative of the committees fighting against closing of the hospitals with Saint Affrique (Southern Aveyron, France) and Lure-Luxeil (Haute Saone, France). It gathers more than 70 groups and committees, throughout France.

[5] [London Health Emergency](#) is a collective umbrella organisation for local campaigns defending hospitals in the capital against closure, founded in 1983. It has coordinated and animated local mobilizations since its creation and presents analyses of the health counter-reform. Its director, John Lister, published a critical guide of these reforms in Europe, North America and in Australasia, *Health Policy Reform: Driving the wrong way?*, Middlesex University Press, 2005 as well as *The NHS after 60 - For patients or profits?*, Libri publishing, 2008.

[6] [Keep Our NHS Public](#) is the name of the British unitive campaign against the privatisation of the health care system.

[7] Europa von Unten is a network of organizations and individuals in Germany founded in June 2004 at the time of the European meeting of ATTACs to fight against austerity, privatisations, militarization, and the destruction of nature... on a European scale.

[8] Revolutionärer Sozialistischer Bundis one of the two public organisations of the German section of the Fourth International.

[9] The Nouveau parti anti-capitaliste (NPA) was founded in 2009 on the initiative of the Communist revolutionary league (French section of the 4th International) to bring together anticapitalist militants in France.

[10] Socialistiska Partiet is the Swedish section of the 4th International

[11] The Peoples Before Profit Alliance was founded in 2005 by militants of various local campaigns and gathers various organizations, including the Socialist Workers Party (Irish section of the International Socialist Tendency), Community & Workers Action Group and of the militants of Campaign for an independent left. Among its campaigning themes the fight for a free, universal health service of quality appears first.