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Contribution to the round table 'The general interest, an obsolete value?' by
Françoise Geng, vice-President of the
European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU)

EPSU represents workers providing a wide range of 'public services' – defined in the broad sense and without reference to the legal form of the service provider – to citizens and non-citizens across the European continent. EPSU is a member of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and the European regional organization of the Public Services International (PSI). The 'general interest' is at the heart of EPSU and the public services our members provide – from public administration at local, regional, national and European level, to health and social services, to utilities such as energy, water and waste – the general interest should steer the direction we go in, at all levels.

Today we see what can happen if the pursuit of economic growth and profit is decoupled from fundamental values and rights. As noted in CIRIEC's call for papers' for the Congress, *"The world economy is living a time of quick and deep mutations which reveal more acute due to the international economic crisis, to the environmental stakes and to migrations of many populations. Principal problems of our century: increasing poverty, bigger and bigger inequalities, environment and climatic stakes, employment, survival of humanity... Fundamental values are in danger: democracy, solidarity, responsibility, cooperation, general interest."* In this context quality public services and the broader social economy working in the interest of the many - and not the few - are needed more than ever.

EPSU is deeply convinced that the fundamental rights for users of public services and for workers that provide them are inter-linked. In many cases we have been able to work with employers in our sectors. We have established at European level formal social dialogue committees for all major EPSU sectors and have agreed a wide range of instruments, on workplace issues as well as broader social concerns (for example an agreement on 'sharps' injuries in the health sector, guidelines to support the integration of migrants and refugees in local government, agreement on information and consultation rights in national administration...)

We have also been active with civil society, for example in the successful European citizen's Initiative (ECI) Right2Water campaign. EPSU was part of the broad environmental and social coalition that lobbied together to influence the recent EU Directives on public procurement and concessions. We are leading members in the increasingly high-profile European and international tax justice network that aims to combat tax avoidance/fraud and promote fair taxation. On trade EPSU is active also with the municipalities and civil society to prevent agreements such as CETA (EU Canada), TTIP (EU US) and TiSA (pluilateral trade in services agreement) advancing even further the interests of the few at the expense of the many.

Over the years one of EPSU's links with CIRIEC has been EU liberalization policies in the 'network industries' (post, telecoms, transport, energy..) and also in other public services. (Our critique....) Liberalisation policies and the focus on competition and short-term profit

as opposed to solidarity and cooperation have undermined the general interest principles that public services depend. There is a need to build a positive agenda at European level (and at all levels) for public services and the broader social economy. The European Commission and governments various political complexions have tried to address the problems of liberalization in energy for example with more liberalisation, always arguing that market liberalization has not gone sufficiently far enough. But clearly more innovative measures are called for if Europe is to respond to challenges such as climate change and increasing energy poverty. At national level much can be done, for example initiatives in Slovenia (and France?) to include the right to drinking water in the Constitution. Here the Slovenian National Assembly has voted to begin the process of amending the constitution to include the right to 'safe drinking water.' This follows 55,000 Slovenians, nearly 3% of the entire population, signing a petition in favour of including the right to water in the Constitution.

The former President of the European Commission (EC) Jacques Delors is famous for saying: "Nobody can fall in love with the Single Market". He might have added 'or the EMU.' Clearly competition and negative economic integration without rules to protect people will not build a cohesive Europe. The modest social agenda that developed in the 1990s and early 2000s – for example on health and safety at work, on working time or atypical work ground to a halt some time ago but the Single Market and economic policies have not. On the contrary, they have sped up and inequalities and poverty within and between countries have increased accordingly. There seems to be growing *recognition* that the growing lop-sidedness of Europe is a problem, but this is not yet connected to moves to strengthen social policy.

The 'Social Investment Package' and more recently the EC proposal for a 'Pillar of Social Rights' are examples of promising beginnings that still have to deliver concrete results. Interestingly in the Social Pillar papers from the EC there is no reference at all to the EU 'acquis on public services, although the Pillar does mention explicitly healthcare and social services such as eldercare and childcare, as well as what is called 'essential services (utilities).' Public services are also essential to many other areas in the Pillar (e.g., education and skills). Neither the SIP or the Pillar of Social Rights refers to the need for increased public investment to deliver quality public services for all.

For workers and trade unions too, still to be resolved are the so-called 'Laval'-Quartet rulings of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) that placed Internal Market freedoms above fundamental rights of workers. The EC's proposal to revise the Posted Workers Directive has been criticized by trade unions as not being ambitious enough but it has already ran into substantial opposition (e.g. the yellow card procedure by national parliaments and fierce opposition from the European employers organisation Business Europe). This basic conflict with the fundamental right to equal treatment of workers must be resolved as without it there is no fair competition (which is also in the general interest).

The ETUC has called for the inclusion into the Treaties of a Social Protocol to reconfirm the primacy of fundamental rights over single market freedoms and it has recently launched discussions on a 'platform for the future of Europe' in response to the refugee emergency, BREXIT, rising xenophobia, poverty and populism.

EPSU is contributing to this discussion, stressing that we have a Protocol on public services (Protocol 26 on services of general interest) that sets out a number of principles but that these have not yet been implemented. Rights to quality public services for all are needed.

It is not enough however for EPSU and others to campaign and work hard for progressive change. We need to have our voices heard more, but other voices need to be heard less. The EC has set up numerous advisory and expert groups that do not work in – or for – the general interest and undermine democratic and representative bodies such as the EP, EESC or social partners. In the expert group on Good Tax Governance, for example, a majority of representatives speak for organisations that have little expressed interest in tackling corporate tax dodging. According to a joint report by Alter-EU, AK Europa and the ÖGB, almost 80 % of stakeholders in the group represent corporate interests, with only 3 % representing small and medium-sized enterprises and 1 % representing trade unions. *“The foxes are in charge of the hen house”*, the report appropriately describes this extraordinary situation. Yet tax and social justice are key priorities for citizens living and working in Europe.

In a EC conference in October 2013 *‘The Path to Growth: For a Business Friendly Public Administration’* the EC’s opening remarks stated *“We need to get Europe back on track, to enhance economic growth and well-being for our businesses and citizens. An important way to achieve this is to ensure that companies are working in a conducive business environment. We cannot have growth without competitiveness.”* Equating the well-being of businesses with that of citizens is an illustration of how the general interest can be manipulated and used to camouflage very specific interests. The EPSU reaction at the time was to reject the exclusive focus on a ‘business-friendly’ administration and to recall that public administrations must serve the interests of all people, not just one segment of society.

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In Europe today (big) business even has its own ‘better or smart regulation agenda.’ EPSU condemns this ‘silent revolution’ to turn public administrations into business outlets. An interesting reflection on this is given in the latest HESA (workers’ health and safety) magazine, in an article on the battle to limit endocrine disruptors: *‘The problem with lobbying is not that industry defends its own interests. It is that public authorities cannot maintain the integrity of their decisions.’*

EPSU’s experience shows us that there are possibilities to influence developments and to protect and strengthen the general interest, in spite of the difficult current social, political and economic context. Reaffirming the general interest is central to this. Indeed the right to good administration is mentioned in the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Our possibilities to have influence can only be stronger when we build common objectives and work together.