

Water Conference Moscow 22 March 2012

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Dear Sisters and Brothers!

Thank you for this opportunity to be together with you on this very important seminar on the World Water Day.

I wish to congratulate you on the long lasting cooperation between ALSWU, Russia and Fagforbundet, Norway. Both trade unions are covering very important areas of the public services and I know that you show a strong engagement in securing that the public services are developed in the interest of the people in our societies – your fight against commercialisation and privatisation is absolutely in line with PSI policy.

As you will know we have just finished the World Water Forum last week, we had a strong PSI delegation on the ground in Marseilles in Southern France.

The United Nations announced last week that the MDG (Millennium Development Goal) target on water supply has been met in 2012, three years ahead of deadline. For this, we should join in congratulating governments, unions and civil society for their efforts.

Public utilities and their workers deserve special recognition.

How did the world come to this achievement?

We must recognise that over 90% of the investments for these improvements have come from public coffers. Private investment, development banks and donors have contributed relatively little, despite all of the hype and promise from the World Bank, the OECD and all of their consultants and front groups. It is the public utilities that really matters – and it deserves recognition and appreciation!

Let me emphasise that the UN water MDG is far from satisfactory. There are still more than 2 billion people who don't have access to safe water in their houses. And remember it is expected that the world will have extra 2 billion people by 2050. In the next decades we know that water will become a scarce resource in many parts of the world.

So, we need a clear vision – a vision that must build on the fact that public utilities has been crucial to achieve the MDG on water – and therefore also must be seen as key-player for the next goals.

PSI is committed to fight on this terrain until we reach universal access to water and sanitation. It is not just about people surviving; it is also about a life in dignity and equity.

Our most recent research confirms two key points: privatisation does not facilitate access, nor does it bring any new investment.

We call on all governments and international agencies using public funds to cease the false privatisation promises and move to direct action using public funds and public management.

We also call on donor and development agencies to focus their efforts on the poorest countries, those 20 or 30 which really need international solidarity from our taxes. And, we suggest that all

actors support the public-public partnership concept which allows twinning between public utilities, again under principles of solidarity and not using profit maximisation, mergers and takeovers.

Further, we call on all trade unions to support these initiatives, with their political muscles and to accompany us in the PUPs projects – so that workers from the partner countries can increase their input in the project. Let me just refresh your memory by mentioning that PSI instituted a new “Trade Union Quality Public Services Award” in 2010 and that the first union to be awarded was our PSI affiliate in the Water Services in Peru. They won the price because of their outstanding work for the promotion of clean water and sanitation.

Last week, trade union activists from more than 30 countries descended on the city of Marseille in France with a whole range of messages to actors participating in the commercial-oriented World Water Forum and the alternative People’s Forum. We join with many civil society allies in opposing the water forum trying to negotiate a global ministerial declaration which in this week they used to try to weaken the UN General Assembly’s 2010 resolution on the right to water and sanitation.

This, and the fact that the 2009 forum refused to acknowledge this same right are clear demonstrations that the water forum should limit itself to what it really is: a commercial trade show of private sector suppliers, consultants, etc. Questions of water policy must be negotiated and debated under the UN mantle, which must free itself of the increasing corporate capture and open its doors much more to workers and civil society participation.

As I stated in the beginning – it is not the private water sector who can take the honour of achieving the MDG on water.

For PSI, access to Quality Public Services is fundamental to creating justice and equity in our societies. In Russia, we witnessed the illegal pillaging of your country’s wealth, with hundreds of billions of euros equivalent being stripped and shipped to banks in Switzerland, the Caribbean, and other refuges for illegal money.

This rape of Russia’s wealth had the direct consequence of weakening your public services, to the extent that you now are faced with massive privatisations.

Yet what happened in Russia basically followed the prescription set down by the IMF, World Bank and other members of the Washington Consensus. This global package of policies includes free trade, deregulation and privatisation, which when followed closely, make a few people and companies very rich, while impoverishing workers and their families.

Free trade – while nice in name, can produce some very bad results. Basically, it allows the developed countries with their rich corporations to freely enter your markets and take over your infant industries. Further, the rules of free trade will allow these corporations access to your natural resources and, increasingly, to your public services. Trade in public services?

Well, privatisation of public services, and then trade of these privatised companies. In the UK the private water and energy companies have been sold many times over, and foreigners now control these sectors.

PSI, EPSU and a number of allies were able to block attempts by the WTO to include the water sector in the GATS. But this doesn’t mean that your government won’t agree to open up this sector or

other public services in bilateral trade agreements. You must remain vigilant. EPSU is currently working with PSI and CUPE to help block the proposed Canada-EU free trade deal.

I spoke of the Washington Consensus, which has been heavily weakened, but I need to touch on the nest of neo-liberals in Brussels. The powerful corporate lobbies are firmly entrenched in the organs of the EU. They are pursuing privatisation as a major source of corporate expansion and profit maximisation. We need to stop them so they stop pushing beyond the EU, in GATS, in developing countries and in Europe.

Our EPSU colleagues are now using the new European Citizens' Initiative available since January 2012 under the Lisbon Treaty. On 1 April, EPSU will submit the papers to the European Commission, and from then we will have one year to collect one million verifiable signatures from at least 11 member countries. We will offer letters of support from unions around the world, to give moral support and lend more credence to this initiative. EPSU will also be looking for workers from countries in Europe but outside of the EU like in Norway, Russia, Central-Asia and other CIS countries to support the initiative to give a strong signal to the European Commission that we reject the neo-liberal agenda. We look forward to receive thousands of signatures from you, in Russia and in Norway, to underline our support for the human right to water and against this artificial competition in water – and that might be a signal also to those in your countries who push for such an agenda. Unions are working together with anti-poverty campaigners, with environmental organisations, municipalities and public water companies, our Norwegian colleagues have done something similar and – I hope that is possible in Russia as well.

Not least in the light of the initiatives you are taking now towards the Duma in relation with Russia's negotiations with WTO.

In fact, these citizen initiatives or referenda are increasingly important. In Italy unions and civil society groups organised a referendum last year, you may have heard of it... Fully 96% of voters opposed water privatisation, which blocked the Berlusconi government from moving forward with the planned sales. And in Madrid two weeks ago, the same thing; an unofficial referendum showed that 98% opposed the sale of their public water utility. In Greece, in Thessalonica, workers and citizen groups have organised in neighbourhood cooperatives to buy the shares of the water utility which the government is about to sell (for a fraction of its real value). More and more workers and their communities are organising to defend our public services, our jobs and our dignity.

But, as part of the austerity policy that is threatening to vandalize public services in several European countries we have seen that Portugal has been forced to privatise several public utilities – and as part of this Portugal has sold a water company to a Chinese company.

With these words I come to the end of my intervention. I hope it will inspire your future work to secure that trade unions in the public sector will be active in the fight for people's right to clean water and sanitation. We have opportunities to unite around this theme; not only today at the World Water Day, but everyday as part of our global campaign for Quality Public Services.

I wish you success in your efforts and wish you a successful seminar today.