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Europe

Public services for the common good

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All industrialised countries are facing a two-fold process of deregulation and privatisation, affecting both public services and social security. The ultimate goal of this offensive is to put sectors of economic and social activity back into the market.

In health care, education, pensions, the post office, telecommunications, transport, water and energy, there is an overriding logic demanding the "re-commodification" of the goods and services involved.

This universal offensive is backed up by international institutions. The latest World Bank report on pensions is essentially a how-to-do-it kit for private pension schemes, to be used in the North, the South and the East.

The specifically European dimension is that privatisation and social spending cuts are being carried out in the name of the Maastricht Treaty. A number of white papers have laid down a programme for privatising the post office, telecommunications and other sectors. Resistance, however, has forced a reluctant recognition of the notion of public service, now referred to as "universal service".

In France, Belgium, and some other countries, the defence of public services is a popular touchstone for the working class movement. But even here the bourgeoisie is waging an aggressive ideological and political offensive. They raise the question of efficiency where public services function poorly - the Italian postal service is a good example. More recently they have raised technological arguments (new products, new demands). In the (nationalised or subsidised) airline industry, they point to competition in a globalised economy.

A two-tiered system

We must stress the dangers of privatisation. By abandoning a system of transfers between regions and sectors, a two-tiered system will be established. Profitable sectors will have priority, while others receive the basic minimum. Any truly European project should do the opposite: expanding such transfers in the interests of social equality and regional balance.

Privatisation increases the quality of services to wealthy and powerful "customers". But if we define quality in terms of the common good, then ensuring direct workers' and users' control over the organisation of public services will probably do more for quality than handing profitable operations over to the market might.

Profit is a short term criteria. The public purse usually picks up the tab for infrastructure investment and research, and, as we know, private companies pay scant attention to the environment. Only by socialising public services can they play a key role in ensuring long-term sustainable development.

Competition leads to the absurd splitting up of "natural" networks and connections. It is wrong to say that the market provides the necessary regulation. If European construction is to be something real, the need is for more and not less regulation in this field.

The bourgeoisie benefits from the low regard the public often has for the state sector - a low regard stemming from bureaucratic structures, social-democrat style nationalisation, technocratic monoliths like the French electricity utility

EDF, which has aggressively pushed nuclear power on the country. These state enterprises are hardly models; they do not bring the state closer to the local level, they do not involve consumers, and they are blind to environmental considerations.

A new definition of rights

But rather than defending state enterprises in their current or past form, the working class movement should fashion a renewed vision by advancing demands and new forms of organisation - using a transitional approach and a new definition of citizens rights.

National traditions and consideration of the actual state of affairs in each country should be combined with an over-arching universal vision. The idea is neither to defend an antiquated form of nation-based capitalism nor to build European mammoth bureaucracies. The guiding principle should be democratic subsidiarity.

The whole working class movement must take up these demands. The idea of defending and extending public services must not be left to workers in the concerned sectors, struggling on their own. The struggle must also be European in nature.

Organisationally, trade union organisations and community groups should find a common framework to defend and extend public services. Programmatically, the idea of a Charter of Rights for the Citizens of Europe should take shape around a renewal of the notion of rights - including rights to housing, transport, communication, health care and education.