

Economists stand with essential workers

We, economists from around the world, support essential workers' and their trade unions' demands for a reform of EU public procurement rules that strengthens collective bargaining and improves working conditions in labour-intensive sectors such as cleaning, security and food services.

The Covid-19 pandemic underscored the critical economic value of outsourced workers in sectors such as cleaning, security, and food services. Yet, despite the essential workers who kept our communities safe, clean and fed during the pandemic's darkest days, they are frequently perceived by both public and private entities as mere cost factors rather than as crucial investments into society's health, safety and well-being. A year and a half after the WHO declared the end of Covid-19 as a global health emergency, the end of the social emergency that many essential workers face has not yet arrived.

Moreover, many essential workers are migrant workers — mostly women — and face the threat of a growing far right that uses its political power not just to push against progressive economic policies but to further stratify the labour market along lines of nationality, religion, gender, and sexual orientation.

Now, essential workers and their trade unions are mobilising to Brussels to push for a progressive reform of the EU Public Procurement Directives.

Public procurement, or the contracting of private firms by public authorities to deliver goods and services, amounts to two trillion Euros, around 14 per cent of the European Union's GDP. Millions of workers are employed in the EU through these contracts, and standards created through public procurement influence pay and working conditions throughout the private sector. But current procurement practices — with their dominant focus on the lowest price in tenders — create market conditions that allow bidders to disregard social criteria. The EU Public Procurement Directive's emphasis on price as the primary award criterion marginalises other critical factors, such as labour rights and fair working conditions, which are essential for sustainable economic growth and good jobs.

As European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced a revision to public procurement guidelines in her next mandate, we support essential workers and European trade unions in their fight to ensure fair labour standards, strengthen collective bargaining and workers' voice within these outsourced services. And we will work together with all those progressive forces seeking to improve the livelihoods and working conditions of workers regardless of their status, identity and occupation.

We therefore support the labour movement's mobilisation to “stop the race to the bottom” in public procurement taking place in Brussels on 1 October 2024. Collective bargaining and union rights are a fundamental pillar of equitable labour markets. It is imperative that its principles are integrated and enforced across all public procurement processes.

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