

Waste services in a green economy - Green jobs, safe jobs

(2 April 2014) At the occasion of the launch of a special report on working conditions in the waste and recycling sector on 27 March, the ETUI organised a conference 'Green jobs – safe jobs' for which it invited trade union officials, academics, NGOs and of course people from the waste industry. EPSU contributed both to the magazine and to the conference. A little impression of the conference:

The European Commission wants a recycling society by 2020 where waste is either avoided or used as a resource. This is a laudable aim and offers big opportunities for business and the environment. Few would argue against improving waste management and increasing recycling rates, but jobs in this sector are often precarious and poorly paid. *"But in this euphoria, questions are not being asked about the social and human costs of greening the economy and moving towards a recycling society,"* said **Emanuele Lobina** from the University of Greenwich. Further, the situation seems to be getting worse with the "increasing privatisation" of the waste management industry. When municipal waste services are taken over by private businesses, a greater emphasis on competitiveness *"puts pressures on frontline workers, who are often vulnerable members of our society,"* said **Mr Lobina**. *"But between public and private waste management there is no difference in terms of efficiency,"* he clarified. Outsourcing to private business therefore means "social pain and no economic gain".

Working conditions in the waste sector across the EU are often *"very harsh with people exposed to health hazards and plenty of accidents throughout the process from collection to recycling,"* agreed **Aida Ponce Del Castillo** from the ETUI. She has interviewed many workers on the frontline of the waste and recycling business and relates some of their difficult stories in a special report for the ETUI's Health and Safety Magazine (HesaMag).

Speakers at the conference were united in their belief that newly created jobs in the sector should not be low-skilled, low-paid posts. Indeed, they urged a move towards more high-tech sorting systems to absolve people from carrying out some of the

most menial jobs in the waste sector. In the short-term this could mean job losses. But **Jerry van den Berge** from the European Federation of Public Service Unions said *"he hoped to see new jobs created in consulting and engineering with workers given the opportunity to improve their skills and carry out some of the new tasks. It is not a good idea to keep the very poor jobs, such as in landfill sites or the manual sorting of waste"*. **Laurent Vogel**, senior researcher at the ETUI, said *"these workers are "invisible and left to one side". "We cannot have a serious environmental policy if we don't look at working conditions," he said. "Sustainability, the circular economy and other ecological goals are an illusion with current working conditions."* He suggested it was nonsensical to call for zero waste and then actively pursue economic and trade policies that will de facto create more rubbish. He wanted more "radical change", with an emphasis on "collective solutions" across all policies to move society as a whole towards a more ecological way of living.

Sarah King, advisor at ETUC concurred. *"We need a new path for Europe to change our course of economic policy and to move the EU to a system that pools its resources and invests in green jobs that benefit all EU citizens."* *"Competitiveness is not the be-all and end-all,"* she added. *"Recycling and waste management services are in the public interest."* Ms King underlined that certain services, such as waste management, are vital for societies to function, and that their poor implementation poses dangers for the environment and human health and safety.

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