



## Education Support and Cultural Workers Sector Meeting Report

December 2, 2021

# **Education Support and Cultural Workers Focus on COVID Impact and Climate Justice**

The Education Support and Cultural Workers Network meetings aim to bring together representatives of these sectors to discuss the challenges these employees face and the resources that are necessary to solve them. This meeting made clear that the pandemic continues to cause significant disruption in the education and cultural sectors around the world. The major highlights from the meeting are as follows:

- A TRIPS waiver is essential to deal with the current pandemic and the continuous rise of variants. This is especially clear now in light of the Omicron variant currently sweeping the world.
- Labor shortages remain an issue across both education support and cultural sectors internationally, with every presenter mentioning the challenges employers face in attempting to retain their workforce and the effects this has on current employees.
- Underinvestment in education is negatively affecting student success, especially in light of the pandemic.
- COP26 failed to bring about a climate agreement necessary to address the worsening climate crisis. Carbon emissions must be reduced by 7% per year through 2030 to avoid the worst of the climate crisis. Emissions fell by 6% in 2020. We must continue to work for a transition to an equitable, sustainable energy system where control and power is shifted towards workers, communities and the public.

The meeting began with **Sandra Davis, ESCW Co-chair**, highlighting that there continues to be a political divide in vaccination in the United States but that our focus must be on unity rather than division. She mentioned that staffing shortages are challenging for schools right now but that the AFT is putting together a task force to address this issue, increase staff diversity, and improve working conditions. Sandra also included that the AFT wants to improve access the green electric school buses and is advocating for free meals for students.

**Marcelo di Stefano, ESCW Co-chair**, indicated that vaccination in Argentina is selective at the moment so efforts to expand vaccination should be redoubled, emphasizing the important role of trade unionists in doing this. He warned that there is a neoliberal, right-wing political wave rippling around the world right now that is looking to cancel public services so we must also redouble our efforts to fight against this. Marcelo offered an update on the recent PSI Executive Board Meeting where they discussed the modification and debate of bylaws, reviewed the PSI finances, analyzed committee reports, discussed the recent Inter-American Human Rights court decision in favor of workers, and approved postponement of the next World Congress to October 2023 to be held in Geneva.

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**PCS Vice President Zita Holbourne's** report on critical issues facing cultural workers in the UK was the first presentation. Workers in this sector in the UK are struggling with a lack of full protection from COVID-19 at the workplace and job losses that has not recovered from the beginning of the pandemic, with 55% of these jobs having been furloughed. Wages are down, there is a skill gap within the sector, and there is not a living wage for most employees. These issues disproportionately affect minority populations and have widened social gaps that preexist the pandemic.

**Jon Richards, Assistant General Secretary of UNISON**, presented on issues facing the education sector situation in the UK. The UK governments are putting into place education catchup programs but they have not received enough funding. Brexit has limited the free movement of labor between the UK and the EU which has caused labor shortages in the UK. There has been significant underinvestment in higher education across the country, with most investment going into new buildings, while higher school fees have not returned to workers. The pandemic has also reduced international student enrollment which has been a major source of funding for higher education institutions in the UK.

**PSI Deputy General Secretary, David Boys** was a featured guest at this meeting and spoke to the network about COP26 and the ways forward on the climate crisis. He stated clearly that it is necessary to have strong public services and governments if we are to address this crisis effectively. The private sector is not taking enough initiative to reduce their emissions and investment in fossil fuels. Carbon emissions must be reduced by 7% per year until 2030 if we are to be on track to avoid the worst of the climate crisis. This will be extremely difficult to achieve. For context, carbon emissions fell by 6% in 2020 even with lockdowns and the broad travel and supply chain effects of the pandemic. Wealthy countries must reduce their emissions the most but are not committing the resources or billions of dollars in funding necessary to do so. Mr. Boys raised the divestment action taken by the Netherlands' largest pension fund, the ABP fund, to illustrate the unwillingness of fossil fuel companies to change. For the ABP fund to choose to divest \$15 billion euros from fossil fuels indicates that there is no way to convince these companies to change their business.

**Everline Aketch, Sub-regional Secretary for English-Speaking Africa**, reported to the sector the effects of the pandemic within several African nations. Covered throughout was the necessity for governments around the world to recognize the critical role a TRIPS waiver for vaccine production would play in accelerating global vaccine distribution and hastening the end of the pandemic. This is especially relevant in light of the rapidly spreading Omicron variant. The importance of having a TRIPS waiver is made exceptionally clear when examining the effect of the pandemic in countries across Africa, where some schools have been closed since March 2020 and remote education is inaccessible to most children. This has caused many families to stop seeking education for their children and turn instead to child labor, in many cases to make up for a loss of income affected by the pandemic. Some African countries have even seen as much as 90% of their education support workforce laid off without pay or other social or economic support. In addition, increased violence has been a problem since the start of the pandemic, with a 60% increase in gender-based violence in Liberia and Uganda alone.

**Eric Pronovost, President of the Fédération du personnel de soutien scolaire (FPSS-CSQ), and Valérie Fontaine, President of the Fédération du personnel de soutien de l'enseignement supérieur (FPSES-CSQ)**, reported on issues facing the education sector in Quebec, Canada. A broad labor shortage, expected to last through 2030 and worsened by the

pandemic, is currently affecting employment across multiple sectors in Quebec. In education, students receive fewer services than what should be offered, many employees are leaving their jobs for positions in the private sector, and employees must work overtime, fill in for others, or not take time off, in order to make up for the labor shortage. Across all sectors, as many as 31% of young workers are considering leaving their jobs. This trend extends to the education sector, where many people are leaving their positions in public education to get the same or similar job in the private sector.

We will follow up on these issues in the next meeting, including the impact of the Omicron variant which just started to appear when this meeting took place.