

So. Europe Doctors: Stop Cutting Health

by Gretchen Small

Jan. 17—The Medical Associations of Portugal, Greece, Spain, and Ireland issued an “Open Letter to Political Leaders and Health Authorities of Europe” this week, decrying the disastrous effects imposed on them by the austerity policies of the IMF-European Union-European Central Bank—the infamous Troika—which are wrecking the lives and health of their nations. The letter insists that the effects of financial policies on the health and health-care systems of and for their peoples must be taken into consideration before being adopted.

The letter, signed by the heads of those four national associations, plus other relevant personalities from those countries’ medical and academic communities, was released in Lisbon by the Portuguese Medical Association on Jan. 15, and was to be released in the other signatory countries over the course of the week.

Such a call from the medical establishments of four nations is unprecedented, albeit overly polite about a policy which constitutes nothing less than genocide. All assertions that morality must determine public policy are useful, but at this stage of the crisis, appeals will not work. Nothing short of governments bankrupting the speculators by implementing Glass-Steagall laws can protect the people.

Greece is the most advanced example of the Troika view that public health-care systems are no longer affordable, but the same holds for the other countries. Last Fall, for example, at Troika insistence, the Portuguese Ministry of Health announced that HIV retrovirals, cancer medications, and biological agents for rheumatoid illness should be rationed, because those drugs are too expensive in a “world financial crisis.” Now, the IMF has presented the Portuguese government with recommendations for how to cut the budget by another EU4 billion. According to Portuguese press accounts, the IMF proposes that in this country, with over 16% officially unemployed, co-pays for public health care not only be increased, but also be extended to those currently exempt, such as pregnant women and

children; 10-20% of public workers be fired; and pensions be cut across-the-board by 10%.

So much for IMF chief economist Olivier Blanchard’s recent *mea culpa* over the “unforeseen” consequences of IMF policies.

Policies Must Defend the Common Good

The Open Letter asserts from the outset that it is “unacceptable” that “decisions of critical importance for the economy and for social protection systems ... have been taken, particularly over the last two years, by the EC, the ECB, the IMF, and national governments” without taking due account of their effect on national health systems.”

It continues:

“Social and economic crises of the magnitude now experienced in many European countries have well-known health implications:

“Loss of self-esteem, depression and suicide;

“Increased susceptibility to communicable diseases;

“Enhancement of risk-taking behavior, both in terms of addictions and as regards risk factors of chronic conditions....

“Public services have been deprived of the funding necessary to perform adequately while community health needs are increasing.

“This is now happening: extensive and deep human suffering, and increased number of situations that defy the most basic and ethical concepts of human dignity.

“Deteriorating health systems—along with the emigration of the most qualified among the young, long-term unemployment, and depressed fertility rates—will very likely have long-term consequences, affecting future generations....

“The signatories of this open letter call upon the international and national political and health authorities to:

“...Ensure that awareness of the health impact of the financial and economic decisions adopted in the recent period, results in a rapid revision of such decisions, in order to urgently prevent further deterioration of the health and health services in our communities.

“...Mobilize and orient towards the Common Good, the extraordinary potential of intelligence, knowledge and innovation of today’s societies, rather than undercutting the health system’s ability to evolve, transform itself, better perform its function, become more citizen-centered, and respond to current and future challenges.”