Contempt for court interpreters

AIIC fully supports the struggle of UK court interpreters to defend their profession, their rights and the rights of those they serve.

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The ongoing debacle in the UK, where courts are obliged to adjourn and human rights can't be defended because of the absence of interpreters, has brought to light the disregard for this branch of the interpreting profession – not only in the UK.

Court interpretation in the UK was previously organised generally on a one-to-one basis between court officials and interpreters. By forcing through a privatised and centralised organisation of this service, the government has pushed the hard-working, low-earning interpreters to the limit and, supported by the Unite union, many have withdrawn their services and demonstrated publicly against the move.

The government cost-cutting exercise was intended to make savings of £18 M, but is likely to cost the taxpayers much more through court adjournments and extended custody for defendants.

Roughly 2,300 interpreters are registered with the UK National Register of Public Service Interpreters, which has stringent quality and experience criteria for registration. The interpreters are complaining that the private company brought in to organise their services is concerned with neither quality nor experience. Their wages and expenses have dropped dramatically, making it not worth their while to work in what are already tiring and often distressing circumstances.

AIIC's Court and Legal Interpreting committee has been concerned for many years with the situation of court interpretation, particularly in Europe, and has tried to improve the quality of service provided, especially through training. AIIC is also an associate member of Eulita, the European Legal Interpreters and Translators Association, where two of our members are President and Vice-president.

We have been closely following the unfolding events in the UK. We have posted about it on our Facebook pages "Interpreting the World", Interpreting.info and "AIIC project to help interpreters in conflict zones". Read more about it through this Channel Four report.

Ministries of Justice should seek to provide services efficiently. But trying to improve a functioning service requires consultation with the people involved. There seems to have been none with the interpreters in this case. The system worked relatively well before; it is now in chaos.

Linguistic competence is not valued highly in the justice system throughout Europe, judging by the rates paid and the conditions imposed on the interpreters. The interpreting profession in general, whether in the area of public services or in our own specialisation of conference interpretation, is largely misunderstood. We generally remain in the shadows, our work is ephemeral, results are
largely unrecognised. In this case, the interpreters have left the shadows in order to defend their profession.

We strongly support the UK court interpreters who have, individually and through their own associations, stood up for the quality of their service, and for their rights and those of the people they serve.

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