

## **A strong European Pillar of Social Rights**

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A big debate is taking place across Europe about a “European Pillar of Social Rights” as a major new initiative to improve living and working conditions. The European Parliament has adopted by a large majority its report in January and the European Commission has just presented its own proposals, including a set of practical measures to implement it, as well as a proposal for a Proclamation of the Pillar.

This debate comes at a crucial time for the future of the European Union. The social dimension of European integration has suffered a heavy blow with the protracted Eurozone crisis since 2010. At the same time, many Member States were forced to implement harsh fiscal consolidation and internal devaluation measures. These policies resulted in severe social hardship which is still acute in many countries. The EU itself has come to be seen by many citizens as a machine for divergence, inequalities and social injustice. A project associated for decades with convergence, prosperity and progress is now being blamed for downgrading of welfare systems and seen a threat to people’s well-being. At the same time, Europe is facing a number of structural challenges such as globalisation, demographic changes (incl. ageing, feminisation, low birth rates, migration), climate change and natural resource constraints. It is also witnessing a new phase of the digital revolution, deeply affecting labour markets’ functioning. All these challenges and aspirations require a number of changes in the toolbox underpinning the European Social Model. With new challenges ahead in the labour market stemming from new types of employment, Europe needs to adapt its labour laws and social insurance schemes in order to ensure decent and fair working conditions and social protection for all workers, whatever the form of employment they have.

The European Social Model has, of course, many national variations and each country has its specific arrangements, in line with historical developments and the principle of subsidiarity. However, EU Member States are highly interdependent and they can only deliver broadly-shared prosperity to their citizens by working together. Without a common European framework, Member States are bound to be trapped in a destructive competition based on a race-to-the-bottom in social standards. The European Social Model is therefore a shared project, whose central objective should be *upward social convergence*: a sustained improvement in well-being for all people in all EU countries, based on sustainable and inclusive economic growth and on measures ensuring that no individual and no country are left behind and everybody can participate in society and in the economy.

The EPSR is an important and urgent initiative, which the European Commission and European Parliament have rightly put on the top of their political priorities to reconcile the European Union with its own citizens. But this project and the idea of ‘Social Europe’ cannot be confined to a small group of EU specialists. ‘Social Europe’ is lived by every person through the rights they have at work, the social services they can access, the social investments they receive, the policies which influence their economic prospects, and the social protection on which they can rely when something in life goes wrong.

'Social Europe' is and must be for everyone, bringing tangible improvements for people's lives. The strength of the EPSR therefore needs to spread through the entire multi-level structure of the EU, including municipal, regional and national governments and their cooperation with companies, trade unions and civil society.

We are all members of the EU. We all have an interest in its balanced economic growth and in Europe's cohesion against the rise of nationalistic actors like Ms Le Pen, Mr Trump or Mr Putin, who seek to dismantle a cooperative international order and who are cracking down on civil and social rights.

No more warm words and false promises, we need now the Commission to come forward with concrete updates of EU legislation and reinforced financing means to ensure decent living and working conditions for the European citizens. The aftermath of a major economic crisis and austerity-led policies coupled with the challenges of a globalized and digitalized world have resulted in poverty and uncertainty in the lives of many Europeans, and these conditions need to change once and for all. If all Member States work together to build a solid European Pillar of Social Rights, people all over Europe will be better off and they will certainly regain their trust on the EU project.

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