

MJR debates social rights with European NGOs “European pillar of social rights” faces high expectations as well as skepticism

15/06/2016



Maria João Rodrigues is preparing for her role as European Parliament rapporteur on the European Pillar of Social Rights, whose first outline was proposed by the European Commission for public consultation in March 2016.

Non-governmental organisations active in the field of employment and social policies are organizing a number of public debates, seeking

to convince the Commission as well as the European Parliament to be ambitious when updating social rights for 21st century Europe. MJR attended one such debate in Brussels on 15 June, with representatives of trade unions, organisations fighting for children’s rights, homeless people, young people but also business associations. Many of these stakeholders are concerned about underfunding of social services and about weakening of workers’ rights due to technological change and globalization.

The European Union has several regulations that protect workers in the Single Market against abuse and against dangers to their health and safety. The EU Treaties contain strong objectives of social progress and cohesion, and the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights sets out many freedoms and rights which the Union is obliged to respect and promote, including the right for workers to organize themselves and collectively negotiate with employers.

However, the practical achievement of these rights is becoming increasingly difficult in a Europe weakened by a long economic crisis, with many people stuck in precarious and poorly paid jobs. Many workers also find themselves unable to exercise social rights properly when they depend on the ‘gig economy’, i.e. doing on-demand work intermediated by digital platforms, with many short assignments but no real employment contract. Moreover, the EU’s current rules on public budgets often work in a counterproductive way, forcing governments to cut down on public investments that could restore decent social conditions and real equality of opportunity.

Maria João Rodrigues therefore sees the on-going debate on social rights as crucial for reconnecting the European Union with people. Social rights must be enforceable in practice and Europe needs real economic instruments to make their achievement possible. This is what she stressed in her discussion with social NGOs and this is what she will fight for in the European Parliament.