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Making work work

The EU needs to back up its policy blueprint on workers' rights with concrete legislation

A big debate is taking place across Europe about the "European Pillar of Social Rights", a document outlining 20 principles that officials hope will guide EU law-making. The document, which is not legally binding, sets out ways to improve living and working conditions across the continent. The European Parliament approved a report on the policy package in January and the European Commission has just presented its own proposals on how to implement 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, ongoing since 2010. At the same time, many member states have been forced to implement harsh fiscal consolidation and internal devaluation measures. These policies have led to severe social hardship in many countries. Many of our citizens believe the EU has brought about inequality and social injustice. The European project, associated for decades with unity, prosperity and progress is now being blamed for downgrading welfare systems and seen a threat to people's well-being. At the same time, Europe is facing the challenges of globalisation, a combination of low birth rates, ageing and migration, climate change and constraints on its natural resources. It is also witnessing a new phase of the digital revolution, which is having a profound impact on how labour markets function. As workers move into 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.

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The European social model – a vision of economic growth combined with high living standards and working conditions - takes different forms in the various member states, in line with historical developments and the principle of subsidiarity. But EU countries can only deliver prosperity to all their citizens by working together. Without a common

European framework, member states will end up in a race-to-the-bottom in terms of social standards. The European social model is therefore a shared project, whose central objective should be what is known in the trade as "*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 European Pillar of Social Rights is an important and urgent initiative, which the European Commission and European Parliament have rightly put at the top of their political agendas to reconcile the European Union with its own citizens. But this project and the idea of a '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 policies which influence their economic prospects, and the social protection on which they can rely when something in life goes wrong.

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'Social Europe' is and must be for everyone, bringing tangible improvements for people's lives. The strength of the pillar 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 nationalists 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 now need 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 globalised and digitalised 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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