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The EU's 'Social Pillar' is well-intentioned but it lacks teeth

Why I'm calling on the EU to enshrine social rights into law

In April this year, the European Commission produced a 20-point political charter outlining a renewed commitment to citizens' social rights. Known as the 'European Pillar of Social Rights', it contains a series of statements on gender equality, fair pay, worker safety, pensions and benefits.

This Friday at the Gothenburg Social Summit, leaders from the EU's 27 member states (minus the UK) will join the presidents of the European Parliament and Commission to endorse the document. The move signals a shift in EU thinking away from austerity and towards sustainable development and social protections for its 500 million citizens.

The EU announced the greater focus on citizens' rights with much fanfare, but actually it falls well short of what Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker had originally envisaged. In his 2014 State of the Union speech, using the language of credit ratings agencies, Juncker declared the EU should aim for a 'triple A' when it comes to enforcing social rights. Currently, though, many EU citizens still face exploitation at work and poverty at home.

The scourge of badly-paid, insecure jobs

We in the European Socialists and Democrats (S&D) group are particularly concerned about how the quality of jobs is deteriorating all over Europe. In many member states, including my home country Germany, we're seeing a strong rise in low-paid work. Austerity and neoliberal policies have only aggravated this trend by undermining social security and social protection systems.

Meanwhile, millions of EU citizens are stuck in 'zero-hours' contracts, which allow employers to hire staff without giving any guarantee of fixed working hours. These workers aren't usually entitled to sick pay either.

Unfortunately, the Social Pillar is not doing enough to address such injustices, since it is not legally binding. Neither does it add anything new to the body of rights already contained within the existing EU treaties. It's all very well to trumpet equality and protections in the workplace, but as long as social rights remain mere proposals without legal teeth, European citizens will continue to suffer.

The Brexit vote, and growing support for far-right, Eurosceptic parties over the past few years, have shown it is often the poorest who feel most let down by the European project. If politicians in Brussels continue to fob off Europe's workers, its children, its youth, its elderly, and the most vulnerable with half measures, even more people will turn their back on the EU.

Workers' rights should be enshrined in the EU's treaties

In particular, we are demanding the right of workers currently classed as self-employed, but in reality bound to a single employer, to be classed as employees. Only last week, the ride-hailing firm Uber lost its appeal against a UK ruling that its drivers should be classed as employees with social security coverage and minimum-wage rights. We want to extend this right to all EU workers.

We also want to see an end to zero-hours contracts enshrined in EU law, as well as an extension of the 'child guarantee' across all member states. This initiative would guarantee free access to decent healthcare, nutrition and education for all EU children classed as poor – that is, from households which earn 60 per cent or less of the median household income in their member state.

We are calling for a directive – an EU law implemented by member states as they see fit – on decent working conditions in all forms of employment, including for temporary or seasonal workers and those working within the 'gig economy'.

The EU can make a genuine, tangible difference in the lives of its workers. But to do this, rights must be enshrined into EU law. To this end, the S&D group proposes that the Social Pillar – the set of 20 statements on citizens' rights – be officially incorporated as an annexe to the EU treaties.

Instead of a mere wish list of rights of Europeans – as we see in the current Social Pillar –the S&D group is pushing for a catalogue of

binding proposals that would put citizens' social rights on the same legal footing as their economic interests – which are protected under the EU treaties. This means that anyone who feels their fundamental right to a decent education and healthcare, reasonable housing or secure employment, for example, is being violated, could take their complaint to a court of law, and ultimately to the European Court of Justice in Luxembourg.

This would be a game changer. For the first time since the EU's foundation, fundamental social rights would take precedence over economic freedoms.

Whilst I welcome the EU's renewed focus on social rights – a policy area largely neglected since the dawn of the financial crisis – I won't be cracking open the champagne on Friday. The Social Pillar holds a lot of promise. But my colleagues and I will keep fighting for more decisive change, and the right of EU citizens to hold their employers and public services to account before the law.



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