EUROPEAN INTEGRATION 12.02.2018 | Luca Visentini

Urgent delivery

The EU must make good on its social promises - and quickly

Unless the so-called European Pillar of Social Rights translates into action to improve the lives of European workers – many of them still suffering from the impact of a decade of austerity – all the talk will have been a waste of time.

Nonetheless, we in the European trade union movement are optimistic that the pillar signals a real shift towards greater social progress in the European Union. We hope it will put the social dimension back into the European debate and give a higher priority to the welfare of EU citizens rather over a 'free market' approach tailored to benefit business.

Following the Social Pillar's approval by EU Member States in Gothenburg in November, we are pushing hard for EU and national governments to implement a range of specific initiatives that we are currently discussing with the European Commission.

But time is short for two reasons. Firstly, austerity has led to a sense of disillusionment among European citizens. This has already contributed to rising extremism and xenophobia. To counter its effects, the EU must urgently demonstrate that social progress is top of its agenda.

Secondly, both the European Commission and European Parliament are approaching the end of their terms. After the elections in 2019, the EU will have new leaders with a new agenda. The procedures for implementing the social pillar must get underway at once if they are to be completed before this time.

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The neoliberal strategies pushed by the current Commission have led to unacceptable levels of unemployment, precariousness, poverty and social exclusion. They have not guaranteed sustainable economic recovery, restored sound public budgets to pay for vital public services or created more quality jobs.

xenophobia.

The time has come for an alternative strategy for sustainable and inclusive growth. Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker himself believes we need a Europe that protects, with an economy that places people's interests above commercial profit.

There are several very important measures at stake. But many of them will require political will on the part of national governments to become a reality.

We know that ways of working are changing faster than the rules can keep up. A recent study by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) found that some 9 per cent of jobs could be lost through automation.

In January we helped organise the start of a European dialogue between online platform operators and workers, because hundreds of thousands of people in Europe are now isolated and dependent on unprotected and precarious jobs in the gig economy for their livelihood. They need access to information about their employers and conditions of work.

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In late 2017, the Commission published welcome proposals for a law on 'transparent and predictable working conditions', replacing the existing Written Statement Directive. It attempts to protect a larger number of workers and end unfair practices, such as charging workers for their own job training or 'exclusivity' requirements that at the same time fail to guarantee paid hours of work.

All workers, be they in seasonal agricultural, domestic and temporary agency work, employed via online platforms in the gig economy or on flexible contracts, must have the right to a written statement of conditions and rights from the first day of employment.

But before the proposal goes to the Council in the summer, we as trade unions are pressing the European Parliament and national governments to do more to protect the most vulnerable workers on precarious and zero-hour contracts. Declaring merely that they 'will be able to request a more secure and predictable form of work, where available' does little to guarantee security or tackle abusive practices. We also want to see greater protection for self-employed and freelance workers, together with a right to equal pay for equal work.

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The Commission's 'Social Fairness Package', due to be launched on 7 March, is closely linked to the implementation of the Social Pillar. It must ensure that equal treatment for mobile workers, together with universal access to social protection, regardless of employment status, is enshrined in EU law.

Reforming welfare systems across the EU to make them fairer and more inclusive is a crucial aspect of the Social Pillar. The right to social protection and assistance for all is a fundamental principle of the European social model.

The Commission's plan to set up a European Labour Authority is welcome. Properly implemented, it could ensure that employers comply with collective agreements and combat cross-border wage and social dumping, particularly in sectors such as construction or transport, so trade unions must be fully involved in its work. We are calling for a strong body with the power to enforce workers' rights and labour standards, apply sanctions against dumping companies and strengthen social dialogue.

Revision of the Posting of Workers Directive is key to greater fairness for cross-border workers. We are demanding an ambitious deal, ensuring full equal treatment, adequate remuneration and allowances and fair protection to all posted workers in Europe. We will press the Commission, the Parliament and particularly Member States to make sure it can be delivered before the spring.

At the same time, national governments must speed up their deliberations and urgently transform promises of a smoother work-life balance into practical rules to benefit workers and their families and create a more sustainable and prosperous society. Reinforcing parents' and carers' leave and flexible working will help to reduce gender discrimination and make sure women have the same access to work and the same rights as men.

In 2018, trade unions have hit the ground running in an all-out bid to ensure that EU and national governments deliver these changes on time. I have already lobbied several EU leaders in person and will continue to do so. We have fought for years for a stronger EU social dimension, now embodied in the Social Pillar, and we must seize this opportunity to transform its principles into concrete measures to restore European solidarity and build a genuinely social Europe.



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