



## RELAUNCHING THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF THE EU. RHETORIC OR REALITY?

Summary of the conference of Wednesday 15 January 2020

During the last European election campaign, several political forces put at the centre of their programs the need to relaunch the social dimension of the European integration project. In spite of that, it seems quite difficult to reach a broad consensus on what should be done, since every member state has its own tradition in matters of social protection and, sometimes, these national approaches diverge widely.

- ? What is a “Social Europe” and what are the origins of this concept?
- ? Is a harmonisation of national systems of social protection feasible? Is it desirable?
- ? A common European minimum wage, good or bad idea?
- ? How do digital innovation and ecological concerns interact with demands for a more social Europe?

We tried to answer these questions with the help of:

**Sylvie Brunet** - She is an MEP since 2019 and is Vice-President of the group Renew Europe. She sits in the Committee on Employment and Social Affairs. She has served as chair of the committee “Work and Employment” in the Economic, Social and Environmental Council.

**Pierre Larrouturou** - He is an MEP since 2019 and is member of the group of the Socialists and Democrats. Issues related to climate change are at the centre of his political engagement. In this regard, he supports the project for a treaty establishing a Union for climate and biodiversity (Climate-Finance Pact) and he is a former member of the High Council on Climate.

**Sylvain Schirmann** - He is a historian, a professor and former director of the Institute for political studies of Strasbourg. His researches focus on trade unionism and social movements in Europe.

**Katrin Distler** - She is advisor for the German Trade Union Confederation Baden-Württemberg.





The father of the concept of Social Europe is Willy Brandt, not Jacques Delors! Professor **Sylvain Schirmann** started his intervention by disproving the common belief that Jacques Delors gave the first impetus to European social integration.

“The origins of the project of Social Europe can be traced back to 1972, when at the Paris Summit of October, the heads of state and government of the nine member states that composed the European Economic Community, met with the aim to strengthen political cooperation”, told Professor Schirmann.

During this summit, Willy Brandt stressed that, in order to move forward, the process of European integration needed a social dimension.

In this sense, “the whole project of a social Europe is nothing new”, explained Professor Schirmann, “In recent years, some progress has been made, but Jean-Claude Juncker didn’t really invent something. Indeed, the directive on posted workers, introduced by the Juncker Commission, with the mention “same work, same wage” was already in place during the European Coal and Steel Community. When an Italian worker moved to Germany to work in the steel industry, the German regime of social protection did automatically apply. Discrimination wasn’t simply allowed”.

According to Professor Schirmann, also the European Pillar of Social Rights, which was proclaimed by the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission at the Social Summit for Fair Jobs and Growth in Gothenburg, Sweden, on 17 November 2017, is nothing new.

“A European Social Charter was already introduced during the Strasbourg Summit in 1989. This document was drafted in the context of the German reunification, and motivated by the fear of some member states that the integration in the single market of former communist countries, which had a much lower social protection, would have eventually led to practices of social dumping”.

Also **Pierre Larrourou** went back in time, to notice how things have stagnated for too long. He recalled that, “when the Treaty of Maastricht had to be adopted, Jacques Delors supported the campaign in favour of the treaty, even if it was not perfect. The former president of the European Commission justified his support by saying that the next step after the adoption of the Maastricht treaty would have been a focus on the social dimension of Europe. It is sad to see that after almost thirty years, most of the social integration promises were not kept”.



## European social policies need to be adapted to platform work



Bringing the focus back to present times, **Sylvie Brunet** stated that today a more social Europe is an “absolute necessity”, because Europe has to respond to huge challenges posed by climate change, digital development and demography and it can succeed in this task only if a certain degree of social cohesion is kept.

“In order not to be considered ‘utopian’, the social dimension of the EU must deliver concrete results to the citizens, have a direct impact on daily life”, said the vice-president of the Renew Europe group, “The Erasmus Plus Program, which enables younger generations to move and study in other EU-countries, is the example to follow”.

Sylvie Brunet insisted that European social policies need to be adapted to the current changes in the labour market. More in detail, she made reference to platform work, which emerged onto European labour markets about a decade ago and is growing and evolving into a variety of forms. The most famous example in this field is probably Uber, which is still best known as a ride-hailing platform but it has been branching out into other industries, like food (Uber eats), electric scooters and bicycles (Jump).

“We do not have to kill these new forms of work. These are opportunities, even if they challenge the current system of social protection. On this we need to work, to provide also platform workers an adequate social protection”.



“Especially in terms of social contributions and pensions, it is important to understand which state administration is responsible for platform workers, as it is the case for posted workers”, added **Katrin Distler**.

**M**ember states diverge significantly in their approach on welfare issues and this is the main brake to the development of a truly European social framework. This is especially true when it comes to the introduction of a common European minimum wage, a measure that the new President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, pledged to realise.

“This project to implement a European minimum wage will take more time than Ursula von der Leyen’s mandate”, affirmed **Katrin Distler**, who noted how two states that are widely known for their strong welfare system, Denmark and Sweden, do not have a minimum wage. In these countries it is up to trade unions to negotiate the minimum and average branch wages and the system works pretty well.

To show how difficult it is to introduce a minimum wage, Distler mentioned the German case: indeed, Germany implemented its version of statutory minimum wage, the so-called Mindestlohn, only five years ago and this happened only after many years of negotiation among political parties and social partners.



## The project to implement a European minimum wage will take more time than Ursula von der Leyen’s mandate



“Divergencies in the approach on welfare issues are rooted in the culture of different member states and have always been a source of disagreement between the two core countries of the European Union, France and Germany”, noted **Sylvain Schirmann**, who recalled how the first Inter-regional Trade Union Council created in Europe, between Saarbrück in Germany and the region of Lorraine in France, in 1975, was a total failure, because French trade unions in the steel sector wished to introduce a cross-border minimum wage and they wanted it to be determined by law, while their German counterparts, who were not contrary to the idea of cross-border minimum wage, insisted to determine it through social bargaining. The French disliked this approach, because fixing the minimum salary through social bargaining would have led to flexible wages, and the project for a cross-border minimum salary was finally set aside.

In order to continue to be viable, the European project needs a broad support and this support depends also on the ability of the EU to reduce social gaps.

“Important social gaps exist already in childhood experiences. We need to support young people more and provide them with the means to exploit the full potential of the single market and fully benefit of the freedom of movement, with programs like Erasmus Plus. This is a way of anticipating the problem. But it is also important to ‘accompany’ individuals during their working life and, finally, ‘repair’, i.e. intervene when people find themselves unemployed. But, in these last situations, it is more difficult to intervene, especially at European level”. These are the ingredients of **Sylvie Brunet**’s “concrete vision” for a social Europe.

**Pierre Larrouturnou** concluded with a more ambitious remark. Comparing the Green Deal to Roosevelt’s New Deal, he said that, “if the Green Deal is well financed, it might be a powerful tool for social justice”.

How? The ecological transition in the energy, transport and building sectors might bring jobs, boost the economy and enable citizens to save money in the long term, because “we cannot ask to every household to find 20 000 euros to insulate their homes. To be successful, the Green Deal needs the same ambition of Roosevelt’s plan”.



**AUTHOR :** Claire Weiss

**COVER LAYOUT :** Ossiann Roux

Please quote this publication as “Relaunching the social dimension of the EU. Rhetoric or reality?” summary of the conference organised by the European Parliamentary Association, Strasbourg, January 2020

Opinions expressed in this publication are personal and do not necessarily represent the views of the Association or of its members.

© European Parliamentary Association, Strasbourg, 2020