

**T**he joint launch of 20 principles for a new European Pillar of Social Rights by the European Parliament, the Commission and the Council appears to be the longed-for reaction – when it is almost too late – to two decades of market-driven policies at the expense of protection for European populations, a liberal capitalist economy that undermines social rights and a flexible labour market that degrades economic security.

Maybe it is not yet too late, although Brexit, **the result of Italian elections and the protests of the ‘gilets jaunes’ reflect the soaring social inequality resulting from this market-driven ethos. Most of all this political and social turmoil makes clear the urgent need for a proper and decent reaction by European as well as national politicians.** The latter should no longer blame the European Union and its bureaucracy by painting it as a Kafkaesque abstraction that decided the policies that have brought us to this point: also national politicians should plead guilty to the neo-liberal turn and its outcomes.

*Over the past two decades, the European labour market has developed into a completely fragmented, deregulated and chaotic arena with problems for which an insurance-based solidarity mechanism or even ‘flexicurity’ are not solutions, because many Europeans – most of whom are women – are no longer part of traditional labour markets.*

**The way in which the 20 principles are interpreted is crucial.** One approach is to accentuate ‘equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion’, [as Frank Vandebroucke does](#). This approach paints the 20 principles as a means of reaffirming that social rights are conditional on a record of employment; according to this approach, social protection should be implemented via an insurance union between Member States rather than in redistribution (Vandebroucke, 2018). The arguments for such a solution at first sight are rather balanced by weighting national and supranational interests, benefits and costs, sentiments and risks. Also, the approach contains a careful consideration of possible implementation instruments; EU legislation; policy

coordination and benchmarking, and EU funding.

**The timing of the launch of the 20 principles is well chosen because the European Union's Social Pillar appears to be supported by Europe's population**, according to [Vandenbroucke's recent opinion poll](#) (Vandenbroucke et al., 2018), and [surveys by Ferrera and Pellegata](#) (2017) and [Lengfeld, Schmidt and Häuberer](#) (2015), all of which have shown that European-level, work-related solidarity would be welcomed by the majority of the EU population. Although the trend towards European solidarity on workers' interests is a welcome reaction to the downgrading of labour-related protection as a result of neo-liberal policies and the emphasis on market and competition between and within Member States several critical comments have to be made.

**First of all, I contend that any proposals for a solution that are not based on an analysis of the causes of the deterioration in social rights, wages and social protection and the increase in social and economic exclusion is going to be too optimistic.** What is missing from the European Social Pillar and from Vandenbroucke's presentation of the European Social Union's aims and goals is an analysis of why wages have fallen, why the increase in incomes has stalled and why inequality between rich and the poor is growing in all Member States. We cannot outline a way forward until we have analysed the roots and causes of decades of neo-liberal reforms, such as deregulation of financial markets, marketisation and outsourcing of public services, and austerity-driven social policies.

**It is one thing to organise solidarity among working people within and among EU Members States, it is something else to ask the supranational EU government and the governments of Member States to take back control of the markets.** Yet without re-regulation of global capital flows that are supported by internationally operating financial accountancy companies in avoiding taxation, without limits on the operations of equity funds that invest in, plunder and then sell companies – even public utilities – an insurance fund might remain futile, for two reasons. The first is lack of resources. An insurance fund would rely on contributions from employers by way of taxation and premiums paid by all companies, large and small, operating in the Union. Consequently, solidarity between workers via an insurance fund would mean redistribution of the already minimal resources of the employed. What is needed is a clear and instant redistribution between companies and their shareholders on the one hand and employees on the other hand.

**Secondly, it demands restoring the primacy of (social) policy and national politics over speculative financial markets.** I recall a statement made by the former (social

democratic) Minister of Finance, Jeroen Dijsselbloem, in reaction to a redistributive budget proposal of Italy. His statement that '[the] market really will have to look at this [the Italian budget proposal] very critically' (CNBC live tv, 18 October, 2018), implying that in the end budgetary discipline is not a matter for politicians but for the market. Although Dijsselbloem might not be a typical social democrat, many will remember the social democratic movement's embracing of the deregulation of the financial, economic and labour markets in the 1990s and its negative consequences.

**Presenting insurance schemes for workers as an alternative to the diminished social rights workers have today, requires that we challenge the relationship between workers who are producers and speculators who invest for rent-seeking and short-term profits** (Stiglitz, 2015). Instead, increasing dividend taxes, regulating global financial flows, halting money laundering and implementing fair trade policies between north-western and southern Member States are examples of combining solidarity between European workers with economic justice involving redistribution between rich and the poor, and between Member States.

**The challenging aspect of the Social Pillar is, therefore, setting a minimum standard for social security and provisions for all European citizens that compensates for the 'forgotten' social rights of the European Social Model during the crisis.** An 'insurance union' might complement the EMU, because, if implemented as outlined above, it would add a new form of pan-European solidarity. However, if it wants to function like that it also should contain the aspects of the Social Pillar that go beyond an insurance union for European workers only and include all European citizens.

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**In my reading of the European Social Pillar the 20 principles are much more extensive, broader in scope and scale and intended to promote more redistribution within and between Member States than the insurance union proposed by**

**Vandenbroucke.** Why should we promote an insurance-based solidarity mechanism rather than the principle of redistributive justice? What real objections are there to the EU's prioritisation of work-life balance? Why does Vandenbroucke neglect other crucial aspects of the 20 principles, such as equal treatment in access to goods and services, life-long learning, protection against poverty, the right to good healthcare, affordable, high-quality long-term care services and social housing. Why does he pay no attention to principle 20, which states 'Everyone has the right to access essential services of good quality, including water, sanitation, energy, transport, financial services and digital communication. Support for access to such services shall be available for those in need.' Why does Vandenbroucke emphasise the role of an insurance fund, reject redistribution and denigrate the EU's prioritisation of work-life balance? One might assume that in an insurance Union a member state that found itself in dire financial and economic straits would be entitled to access the EMU budget to safeguard principle 20 for all its citizens, but there is no guarantee that this would be the case and so something has to be added to the insurance Union.

**Over the past two decades, the European labour market has developed into a completely fragmented, deregulated and chaotic arena with problems for which an insurance-based solidarity mechanism or even 'flexicurity' are not solutions, because many Europeans - most of whom are women - are no longer part of traditional labour markets.** Women are over-represented amongst the populations of involuntary self-employed and working poor in Europe's outsourced and flexibly contracted public sectors. Women have to take care of the soaring numbers of 'boomerang children' returning to the family home as adults and they make up the overwhelming majority of mobile temporary workers leaving their families behind in Eastern Member States for care work in Austria, Ireland, Italy and Spain, which will never afford them any labour protection because they will never meet the criteria for work-related insurance. Even in the well-protected welfare states, public provisions protecting work-life balance are being reduced due to austerity measures, the commercialisation of care services and the new ideology of personal responsibility.

**So I argue that it is crucial to read the 20 principles again, this time not from a workers' perspective, but from a European citizens' perspective, male and female; the perspective of a just Europe.** I admit that the principles then come as a surprise. Do the European Union and its constituencies finally understand that there is more to life than work, that not all EU citizens are workers, that the conditions under which all Europeans live matter and that social services that guarantee a decent and dignified life should be part of the European project? If so, a few recommendations might be worth considering.

## **A bottom-up process to take back control, foster investments and grant work-life balance**

**Taking back control.** Not in the sense of Member States reacting against the European Union, but in the sense of using politics and policies to wrest control over European lives back from the markets. European citizens – and in some countries also their representative politicians – oppose the EU because they blame the EU (rightly or wrongly) for austerity, for the outsourcing of social services to an unreliable market, for the decline in basic public goods (healthcare, elderly care, housing and education) and for inequalities in access to such goods. **Therefore, if the Social Pillar is to be taken seriously, the implementation must go far beyond an insurance union and include taking back political control and increasing budgets for public services, thereby restoring solidarity with those who cannot participate fully in the labour market.** Taxation and dividend policies should be revised to this end. This demands a revision of the neo-liberal paradigm of a small state, with severe consequences for the relationship between EU politics and the financial markets that speculate on the outsourcing of public goods.

**Regional investment strategies.** It is obvious that some Member States struggle to compete with the most advanced and productive Member States. They face not only enormous debts, because of the rigid monetary criteria set by the most prosperous Member States, but consequently also a depressed population, forced migration and consequently care and brain drains. The highly skilled professionals, young women and educated young people from these countries move westward, leaving the rest of the population behind to cope with poor services and demographic losses. **There is an urgent need for investment in poorer parts of Europe to increase social solidarity amongst the regions of Europe and, not least, to reinforce commitment to the European project.** However, given the recent lack of appreciation (in countries such as Wales and Hungary), the EU should also concern itself with the revitalisation of local communities and give a voice to bottom-up organisations that can decide for themselves what would be useful in their context, under current conditions.

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**Work-life balance.** From the 1970s onwards, the European Union has promoted gender equality, although also in order to expand the labour market reserve, resulting in downward pressure on wages. Nevertheless, the EU always has taken the lead in policy reforms aimed at gender equality, more so than most of its Member States, except for the Scandinavian ones. Now the EU does stress the principle of gender equality again in the 20 principles of the Social Pillar. To be sure, neglecting gender equality as a matter of justice can only be justified if one assumes that the average male worker can 'afford' to maintain 'his' family, and supposes that the average female worker is a higher educated woman who has access to affordable childcare. **In many Member States, however, half of the population - the female half - struggles with lower pay than male counterparts receive for similar work, unaffordable childcare, unprotected, flexible labour contracts and pure gender discrimination.** Trade unions have never protected domestic work and the tendency in almost all Member States is to put incentives on minimally paid - female - care at home for elderly and disabled people. Moreover, during the crisis and beyond young people, unemployed or in precarious jobs, have to stay with or return to their families for support. This tendency towards re-familiarization places an extra burden on women, who take most of the responsibility for housekeeping and care. Hence, prioritising work-life balance should in no sense be seen as a luxury. Instead, reaffirming commitment to gender-equal redistributive and recognitive justice at the level of the EU and its Member States still needs high priority.

**Reviving bottom-up processes.** Although I would like to praise Vandembroucke's rational analysis of the mechanisms that can promote European Union solidarity, I also see that his strategy is mainly top-down. In the current era, this is to mistake and misinterpret the lessons of the bottom-up resistance movements. **We can no longer deny the dynamic forces for change that operate at the local and regional level or ignore the NGOs that have taken responsibility for filling the gaps left by (neoliberal) governments and have driven the process of comparing policies and learning, according to their specific needs and interests.** The EU has tried to deal with the 'democratic deficit' by connecting communities and associating them in a transnational *demos* critical of the prevailing order. So far, this has not been successful because it has not made use of existing

A European Social Union for all: a chance to rethink and redo justice  
and solidarity  
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institutional alliances. The agenda for implementation of the principles of the Social Pillar should, however, include more stakeholders; organisations with interests, NGOs that comment on or have taken over the responsibilities of the state, and organised citizens' interests as part of deliberative democracy. Maybe, and most interestingly, a deliberative democracy organised at EU level would overcome politicians' national interests and build a real and just European society.

### References:

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