

On March 8th 2016, the European Commission (EC) launched the process of public consultation on the European Pillar of Social Rights. The initiative had already been presented by the President of the EC, Jean-Claude Juncker, in his State of the Union speech in September 2015.

The European Pillar of Social Rights aims at providing new guidelines to the Euro member states (although non-Euro members are also invited to participate) on labour and social policies. Whereas the Pillar is mostly focused on issues that are the competence of the Commission, it also includes other policy fields that are the responsibility of member states, such as labour markets and welfare issues.

Overcoming the democratic deficit

The latter is especially relevant, taking into account the effects that the economic crisis has already had on labour markets and welfare policies. During the Eurozone crisis, labour markets and welfare policies were considered the main variables of adjustment, leading to a sharp fall in the social standards that had traditionally characterised the European social model.

Another consequence of the crisis has been a greater distancing between people's opinions and needs and the policies recommended by the European institutions.

The neoliberal direction of the structural reforms demanded by the European Council, the Ecofin Council and the European Central Bank, among others, meant the deregulation of labour markets and cuts in social services. In turn, there has been an increase in inequality that has led to rising popular dissatisfaction with the European integration project.

By launching this consultation process, it seems that the new Commission, led by Juncker, wants to reverse this image. Besides, it seems that the Juncker Commission wants to end the "democratic deficit" that is usually attached to European policymaking processes.

Another consequence of the crisis has been a greater distancing between people's opinions and needs and the policies recommended by the European institutions. The public consultation initiative has the objective of involving not only the institutions but also grassroots associations and, in so doing, lending a democratic character to the process.

In relation to this, the consultation seems to be in line with the new communicative approach of the Juncker Commission, a "more direct style of communication between EU institutions and the European citizens", as [Pamela Pansardi argues in a recent EuVisions focus](#).

The online procedure

The consultation will be open to all citizens until the end of the year. However, the Commission emphasizes the need to engage in the process, particularly for other European institutions, national parliaments, social partners, experts and academia.

The procedure is easy. Anyone that is interested just needs to visit the DG Employment website and [answer the questionnaire](#). The consultation process has three main objectives. Firstly, it aims at opening a debate in relation to the social dimension of the European Monetary Union (EMU) in order to detect what are the present needs. Secondly, it wants to gather the views about the main current trends that are reconfiguring European societies and workplaces due to changes in technology, working and social conditions, or demographic trends.

Finally, the public consultation has the objective of providing an evaluation of current rights to examine if they are suitable for facing ongoing challenges. This evaluation aims at redefining a new social "acquis", which is a new body of rights that will meet these challenges in a better way.

This social acquis is compounded by social rights in which the EU has the competence to "support and complement the activities of the Member States", according to Article 153 TFEU of the Social Policy. This refers to policies that aim at integrating people excluded from the social market, improving the consultation with workers, their social security and social protection, and their working conditions, such as workers' health and safety conditions.

In relation to this, the questionnaire identifies six main trends that are impacting on workers' conditions: demographic trends; changes in family structures; new skills requirements; technological change; increasing global competition; and the participation of women in the

labour market.

Controversial issues

On the other hand, the questionnaire asks if you agree to the inclusion of diverse items in the scope of the Pillar. Some of these items were regulated by the EC a long time ago, like gender quality and equal opportunities. However, there are other issues that may be more controversial, such as wages, conditions of employment or pensions.

In this sense, the European Pillar of Social Rights will also include policies that are the responsibility of the member states and, although it does not aim at establishing new regulations of these policies, it aspires to provide guidance and to establish exchange practices.

This is not something new. The EU has launched different initiatives in the last decades with the same objectives. The Open Method of Coordination and Europe 2020 already had the objective of strengthening the harmonisation of these policies through recommendations and joint learning processes. The Pillar is thus a new turn of the screw in the EU's determination to intervene in these areas.

A renewal of the European social model?

There are still many doubts as to whether or not this new intervention of the EU in labour markets and social issues will mean a relaunching of the European social model.

Firstly, the initiative has contradictory objectives. On the one hand, it aims at securing the protection of workers and offering a solution to unemployment, poverty or inequality. On the other hand, however, it maintains the same view held during the crisis—that labour markets and welfare states are to be considered variables for adjustment vis-à-vis economic problems.

This is clear, for instance, when it says that “the future success of the euro area depends, in no small measure, on the effectiveness of national labour markets and welfare systems and on the capacity of the economy to absorb and adjust to shocks”.

Social rights continue to be considered as a productive factor and not as good in themselves.

Furthermore, the Pillar does not leave behind the “flexicurity” paradigm. Therefore the Commission ignores the consensus that already exists between social actors about the fact that this paradigm has only served as a window of opportunity for governments to deregulate labour market institutions without strengthening the security of workers.

The trade unions, which are considered one of the main stakeholders of the process, have already raised concerns about the Pillar’s approach. In relation to this, they argue that it is still unknown if the consultation is just a political manoeuvre to silent the most critical views or if it is going to lead to real change. In order to have a more precise understanding of the process, the European Trade Union Confederation has invited Juncker to discuss some documents on these issues during their next Executive Committee meeting.

Other doubts revolve around the capacity of the Commission to involve all citizens in the process. Member states have a responsibility to open discussions in national societies, but so far the consultation has not been salient in domestic political and media debates.

All in all, it seems that insofar as labour markets and social rights continue to be considered as a productive factor and not as good in themselves to achieve fairer societies, they will depend on economic interests which, during neoliberal times, are at odds with social justice values.

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