

SOCIAL
EUROPEAN

OUR PRIORITIES FOR SOCIAL PROGRESS



European Economic
and Social Committee

Workers'
Group

2025-2030



A background image showing the back of a person's head and shoulders. They are wearing a brown knitted beanie and a dark jacket. They are holding a white megaphone to their mouth. The background is a blurred outdoor scene with trees and a blue sky. A large red semi-circle is overlaid on the bottom half of the image, containing the table of contents.

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Foreword

Our Workers' Group has shown that our collective aspiration to fight for full employment, quality jobs and social progress, stronger workers' rights and stronger Europe is and should be as bold as ever.

At a moment when inequality deepens, jobs disappear, trust in politics erodes and authoritarian populism grows stronger, we want to present a clear vision of how we can respond with responsibility and hope.

We are a unique force within the EESC, made of members with different national backgrounds, an exceptional wealth of diverse talents, experiences and individual commitments to our shared values, the trade union movement.

Each of us has an important contribution to make and together, we are much more than a sum of individuals.

Our work in proposing or updating policies to improve the European project that would ensure future growth and social sustainability, would have an effect on rebuilding the bond of trust between our workers, the citizens, across our Member States and the European institutions.

Europe, as much as the world, needs to find a far-reaching path out of the chaotic, dangerous and unjust times we are living through, and we have the unique capacity to contribute to build this path with our colleagues in the trade union world into a new and better future for everyone.

This has been my goal since the start of our new term: to strengthen our internal capacity, to fight for a progressive European agenda building on the achievements of the last term, and to develop a new long-term project.



So, in November 2025, just after our renewal, our Presidency and Bureau members met in Prague proposing a strategic political plan with a clear mandate:

we had to be more strategic, more effective and to advance towards European integration grounded in social progress and the reinforcement of the democratic development of the EU institutions – placing democratic values and social rights at the heart of Europe's future.

This paper is therefore a vital contribution to that mission.

It offers a roadmap for renewal. It challenges us to think boldly about the future of our movement and reminds us that our strength has always been our ability to adapt without abandoning our core values of solidarity, social progress and social justice.

This is our roadmap outlining our bold visions, strong values and ambitious priorities.

Lucie Studničná,
President of the EESC Workers' Group

A stylized handwritten signature in black ink.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In times of crisis, we do not back down, we do not blame the least fortunate or the most vulnerable, we do not abandon our fight for the environment, for workers or our defence of human rights. We take a stand for the kind of society we want. We strive to forge an equal, strong and independent Europe in a fairer world, where both the burdens and the benefits are shared fairly, using social dialogue to set the solid foundations of a democratic and free society. We turn ideas into policy actions to build a Europe that leaves no one behind.

Social Challenges

Considering the current geopolitical context and the ongoing digital and green transitions, the EU must ensure that its social market economy model perseveres and social cohesion in the EU is not endangered. Political agendas promoting regulatory simplification must not lead to deregulation that erodes workers' rights and the involvement of trade unions. The Workers' Group advocates sustainable competitiveness that allows for innovation and productivity without compromising on social rights.

An important aspect of this is to continue promoting the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), effectively implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights and using the European Semester to monitor indicators. There is a need to democratise work, meaning that workers' participation must be strengthened, board-level representation should adhere to mandatory minimum floors, while collective bargaining and social dialogue should be promoted. All EU policies must undergo social impact assessments.

Improving services of general interest, fighting all forms of poverty, dealing with demographic change through intergenerational solidarity, adequate pensions and ensuring the right to lifelong learning remain social priorities for the Workers' Group. Quality jobs must be guaranteed in view of the current transitions. The Workers' Group will continue to fight precarious work and social dumping and advocate the protection of migrant workers. Moreover, we will continue supporting equal rights, especially in the workplace, by promoting equal pay for equal work, combatting the gender pay gap, condemning discrimination in the workplace and gender-based violence and advocating LGBTIQ+ rights.

Economic Challenges

Job insecurity, increasing precarious employment, the cost-of-living crisis, climate change, demographic ageing and growing geopolitical tensions, including Russia's war against Ukraine and new US tariffs, are accelerating the need for coordinated EU action to strengthen economic and social resilience.

As the EU embarks on a new cycle of economic and governance reforms, modernisation must not become a pretext for deregulation or for diverting resources away from social investment. Instead, reforms should safeguard quality jobs, public investment, territorial cohesion and fair, progressive taxation to ensure that economic progress delivers tangible benefits for working people.

To achieve this, the Workers' Group calls for strengthening the social dimension of the European Semester, reinforced social dialogue and collective bargaining, a more ambitious EU budget and cohesion policy, decisive action against tax dumping, tax avoidance and tax havens, and a just green and digital transition grounded in quality jobs, sustainable finance and robust social and environmental standards.

Environmental Challenges

The green transition, decarbonisation and the circular economy, together with digitalisation, are reshaping the nature of jobs and creating new occupations while eliminating others. These transformations are interlinked and mutually reinforcing and require coordinated economic, industrial and social policies.

Although policies to combat climate change can lead to major socio-economic changes, social progress is not possible without sustained economic progress, and the latter cannot be achieved without a real just transition. A just transition should actively involve workers, trade unions and social partners, safeguard quality employment, public services and territorial cohesion, promote gender equality, and ensure that social and economic progress advance together so that no worker, sector or region is left behind.

To achieve this, the Workers' Group calls for a strong Just Transition Directive and a green and digital transition grounded in quality jobs, gender equality and robust standards. This requires reinforced social dialogue, guaranteed access to reskilling, an ambitious industrial strategy and increased Social Climate Funds.

Digital Transformation

The digital landscape is deeply altering the foundations of work and social relations, with both benefits and challenges for workers. In particular, the growth of platform work and jobs with algorithmic management require special attention, as workers suffer increased surveillance, isolation and lack of possibility to voice concerns, and the Platform Work Directive must be extended to cover them if no other legislation is passed.

Digital infrastructure and services should be considered services of general interest and democratic oversight, security and public ownership promoted. It is key to keep the hu-

man-in-command approach, to guarantee the right to disconnect, to provide decent minimum standards for telework, and to bridge the digital gap and promote digital literacy at work.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) deserves special mention for its transformative potential and impact on the job market. AI must enhance human labour, not substitute it. Its ethical implications (democratic manipulation, deepfakes, use of human culture, etc.) as well as energy and environmental impact (massive demands for energy, water and raw materials) must be ingrained in its regulation and argue against its reckless deployment. This concerns, in particular, the risks of deregulation (as per the Digital Omnibus). Instead, AI use and development must be rooted in human-in-control principles, due diligence, sustainability, privacy protection, transparency and anticipation. It must have labour and social progress and social transformation for a fairer world as goals.

Industrial Change

Industrial change in Europe is accelerating, driven by the twin green and digital transitions, geopolitical shifts and the reconfiguration of the supply chain. It comes with innovation and growth, but also with job destruction, rising inequalities and territorial divergence. It is also affected by the uncertainty surrounding green transition policies due to recent political shifts.

A successful industrial transformation requires having a strong European industrial policy, focused on delivering quality jobs and strengthening labour and environmental standards, and relying on collective bargaining and social dialogue to anticipate restructuring. It should promote a 'Made in Europe' approach in strategic sectors and include social conditionality in EU industrial funding, bringing a stable, predictable, long-term push for a just transition.

Migration

The answer to migration challenges must be rooted in human dignity and human rights, building a common migration and asylum system that creates real, safe and effective pathways. The weight of migration in the political debate has only increased with time, as the far right frames the issue exclusively as a security problem and its views permeate mainstream politics. Europe's response must build on the integration of immigrants, preventing labour abuses and exploitation. It must not shy away from combatting human trafficking mafias and protecting the lives of refugees and migrants.

The EU must also tackle root causes of migration that provoke brain drain in countries of origin and put people at risk in the first place, enhance cooperation with third countries, and ensure Member States share responsibilities and can count on effective cooperation mechanisms.

Rule Of Law and Fundamental Rights

The protection of fundamental rights and the rule of law is a cornerstone of EU construction and of democracy at large, as they are the basis for a functioning democratic and pluralistic society. However, they are increasingly under pressure from far-right movements,

which challenge pluralism, judicial independence, gender and other forms of equality, the universality of human rights, civil society and social partners.

The deterioration of workers' and trade union rights across Europe, including restrictions on the right to form and join a trade union, collective bargaining, the right to strike and freedom of expression, highlights the urgent need to strengthen democratic safeguards and protect social rights.

Our key proposals focus on promoting democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights, and supporting organised civil society in its fight against shrinking space, discrimination and misinformation. We also aim for stronger monitoring of social rights, including the right to strike and collective bargaining, and to push for their full application and compliance throughout the EU. Finally, we seek to combat populism and extremism, with a particular focus on addressing gender-based violence and racism.

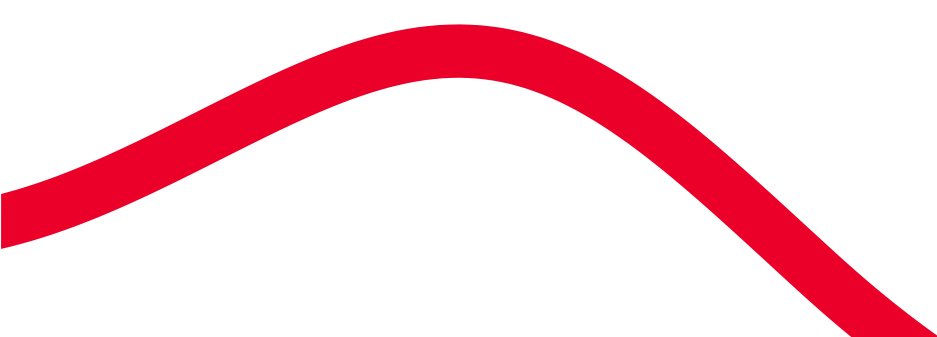
Global Agenda Based on Peace, Solidarity, Equality and Inclusion

The EU needs to speak with one voice on the international stage, yet new wars and crises have shown that this capability is limited, weakening its capacity to support the rights of workers worldwide. The EU's external policy should remain committed to reviving multilateralism, fighting protectionist measures, and ensuring that trade agreements are fair and enhance the protection of workers' and trade union rights. We must recentre the EU's external policy on the idea of the EU as a peace project, rejecting militarisation and subsequent diversion of investments.

EU-UK relations should be fostered, emphasising the principle of non-regression for workers' rights. Support for Ukraine remains a priority, while its accession and that of other candidate countries must include the implementation of workers' protections and rights. Free trade agreements and investments under the Global Gateway must include strong social conditionalities and stakeholder consultations.

Better Policy-making and Foresight

Foresight must remain embedded in EU legislation and the activities of the Workers' Group, especially in times when the Commission's omnibus packages fail to include impact assessments and disregard better regulation rules. The Workers' Group and our network of trade union organisations are best placed to sense underlying trends that shape the future. Our foresight activities include raising awareness and capacity building, strengthening cooperation with other EU institutions and adopting opinions using foresight methodology. Concretely, this should develop a long-term vision of the EU's desirable and achievable future even beyond the 2025-2030 mandate.



POLITICAL OVERVIEW

The 2025-2030 mandate for the Workers' Group is unfolding in an exceptionally complex environment marked by profound structural transformation worldwide. In recent times, the EU has been faced with many difficult challenges, such as war on our continent, geopolitical tensions, climate emergency, soaring living costs, pandemic scars, migration, fiscal constraints and the relentless spread of misinformation, but beyond these crises lie deeper shifts reshaping Europe's economic and social model itself.

Global value chains are being reconfigured under strategic competition. Artificial intelligence is rapidly transforming production and services. Essential sectors such as housing, energy and care are increasingly financialised. These dynamics are restructuring labour markets, redistributing risks and altering social hierarchies.

At the same time, the fragmentation of the multilateral order, along with hybrid threats, disinformation and growing polarisation, generates unprecedented geo-strategic pressures. These pressures test not only Europe's economic resilience but also its democratic cohesion and institutional integrity.

Safeguarding the EU's integrity — politically, economically and socially — therefore requires reinforcing the rule of law, protecting democratic institutions from external interference and internal attacks, preventing social fragmentation from turning into democratic erosion, and making life affordable. In this radically new context, European workers have emerged as a driving force behind groundbreaking social decisions at

the European level. At the EESC, the Workers' Group has been an architect of change, ensuring that all sections are committed to building a strong, democratic, social and inclusive Europe.

Large sections of the working population face persistent loss of purchasing power, rising housing costs, labour market insecurity and mounting pressure on public services. These are not temporary disturbances. They reflect structural imbalances in income distribution, labour regulation and public investment.

Thus, social policy in the new mandate must move beyond crisis management and business as usual. Fairness, effective implementation and enforcement must become structural components of economic governance.

The renewed overemphasis on competitiveness also demands scrutiny. Public resources mobilised under industrial, climate and strategic autonomy frameworks must integrate enforceable social conditionalities. Support for strategic sectors

such as energy, digital infrastructure, batteries, defence and critical raw materials must be based on quality job creation, investment in skills, social dialogue, collective bargaining coverage, gender equality and territorial cohesion.

A competitive Europe without strong labour standards would deepen fragmentation rather than strengthen resilience.



NEW LEADERSHIP AND POLICY CHALLENGES FOR A NEW ERA

This new mandate offers an opportunity to recalibrate priorities in light of profound political, economic and technological transformations, and to reinforce the social dimension of EU policy-making. The EESC Workers' Group's long-standing objective remains clear: To ensure that social progress and democratic resilience become structural pillars of EU action and that the voice of labour is fully present in decision-making.

During the previous institutional cycle, the Workers' Group contributed decisively to the adoption of:

- The Adequate Minimum Wages Directive
- The Pay Transparency Directive
- The Platform Work Directive

Now, we must ensure that legislative progress translates into tangible improvements in wages, working conditions and collective bargaining coverage across all Member States. This requires effective implementation, enforcement and ownership by the Member States.

The Workers' Group will actively engage in the 2026–2029 EU policy cycle, including:

- The new Action Plan on the Implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights
- The Quality Jobs Act
- The European Agenda for Fair Competitiveness
- The European Social Investment Strategy
- The European Affordable Housing Initiative
- The European Care Strategy
- The revision of the European Semester with reinforced social indicators

Strengthening the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights signals recognition that economic and social governance must be more closely aligned. Democratic resilience is inseparable from social cohesion. Where inequality widens and insecurity becomes structural, trust in democratic institutions weakens. Strengthening social dialogue, reinforcing collective bargaining systems, ensuring compliance with the rule of law and embedding the Social Pillar within economic governance are therefore conditions for the sustainability of the European project itself.

These priorities have been reviewed again under the new 2025–2030 mandate, integrating emerging challenges such as the housing crisis, the just green transition, digitalisation with rights, mental health, care systems and democratic resilience. Following the 2024 European elections and the establishment of the new 2024–2029 Commission, our objective is now

to influence the political agenda of the new institutional cycle, ensuring that social progress and democracy become a central pillar of EU action:

To forge a future that seeks to elevate and empower our democracy, societies and every individual, irrespective of their circumstances.

Our journey is an ongoing commitment, demanding unwavering determination as we strive to shape a society marked by shared prosperity and equality. By sending our priorities to the leaders of democratic groups at the European Parliament, Commissioners and Member States' heads of state and government, we aim to infuse our vision into their policies and push for real and sustainable social progress for the coming years.



LEADING THE CHANGE

A Renewed Social Agenda for 2025–2030

The last two decades indicate the need for a new social contract. Despite some positive signs EU-wide, such as confidence in the EU and a relatively strong labour market, the recovery of real wages has been limited and does not add up to recent losses. Large differences across the European Union offer a complicated picture, with some countries stagnating, working and living conditions decreasing and precarious work making up much of new employment.

Soaring housing prices have made a key milestone unattainable for many, and inflation has reshaped life choices. While the improvement of poverty targets is positive in general, progress has been insufficient and child poverty has stagnated. The middle class and upper tiers of the working classes are shrinking across the EU, as adjusted metrics for wage growth and income often do not account for the rise in housing costs or the disproportionate impact that energy and food price increases have on lower-income households.

The general economic hardship for many, linked to several political crises and mounting challenges, has brought societal concerns, severely eroded trust in democracy and national institutions, widening social inequality and leaving many groups feeling excluded. This has created fertile ground for the rise of far-right authoritarian parties in many parts of the EU. As a result, there is a growing sense of disenfranchisement and cynicism, with many people and communities feeling increasingly overlooked by

current policies, political leaders and political processes.

The moment is ripe to radically rethink the type of society we want.

In 2023, the Workers' Group signed a call to action¹ with civil society organisations, trade unions, social economy enterprises, think tanks and other stakeholders calling on European leaders to support a new social contract in which social and environmental sustainability should go hand in hand.

The 2029 European Parliament elections will serve as the next key milestone for our work. Working towards that date, our objective is to shift mindsets and behaviours towards addressing social problems and to offer actionable policy choices. This renewed social contract will serve as the overarching guide for our work.

This **social contract** needs to recognise the

¹ <https://feps-europe.eu/news/a-new-social-contract-for-the-wellbeing-of-people-and-the-planet/>.

mounting evidence pointing to the need for public intervention that can actively shape an economy which serves its citizens and their well-being and can enable sustainable growth and security. A renewed social contract is fundamental to ensuring the survival of the European project by addressing the needs of its population.

- Strong social and workers' rights, including democracy at work, are the foundations of a strong economy and should not be part of any deregulation effort. Their protection ensures the legitimacy of the democratic system and the continuous policy input from the people most affected by it, as well as long-lasting implications for social security, health, demography and many other issues.
- Public sector resources must go beyond traditional taxation schemes, which already rely largely on labour, and have extensive difficulties in properly addressing capital and wealth accumulation and concentration. Corporations and businesses have a responsibility towards the wider society that is accomplished mainly through the effective and fair taxation of their profits, and this must be adapted to avoid gaps for 'tax engineering' and to provide incentives for reinvestment and long-term planning, rather than short-term shareholder dividends and speculation.
- The Member States and the EU must not limit themselves to the taxation of created wealth but rather must engage in wealth creation by means of social investment (for instance, education and research), industrial and energy policy, and economic investment in sectors that are considered strategic or natural monopolies.
- Economic policies by the public sector must therefore not just limit themselves to demand but also act on supply. The consensus on prioritising monetary stability over social investment and equality must be reconsidered, as well as the impact of massive externalities (such as climate change) for which the system is currently unequipped.
- A European Union that relies not just on exports but on internal demand, with proactive public intervention and good public-private balances, that strives for equality and

sustainability, is also the foundation for a strong geopolitical actor that can carry its weight with autonomy and independence, and be a force for democracy, stability, freedom and equality in an increasingly fractured world.

- High-quality, universal public services that are accessible to all constitute the backbone of the European social model and are one of the essential components for a renewed social contract for Europe's workers. Without strong public services, there cannot be improvement of living and working conditions, social and territorial cohesion or economic and social progress. The exact deployment of this social contract is developed in the proposals of the following chapters.

Work plan

A proper course of action – based on the success factors identified by the Workers' Group – is needed to achieve the best possible results with respect to achieving the political priorities.

Our priorities define a comprehensive social agenda in areas where cohesion and democratic stability are most at risk:

- Confronting the housing crisis and homelessness;
- Safeguarding public services and services of general interest;
- Ensuring a balanced and rights-based migration framework;
- Defending fundamental rights, the rule of law and democratic institutions, including fighting racism and resisting far-right extremism;
- Addressing economic and cost-of-living challenges;
- Steering environmental transformation through a just transition;
- Governing digitalisation with strong labour protections;
- Strengthening the EU's global role, including enlargement.
- Success requires strategic coherence, institutional engagement and decisive

implementation.

The strength of the Workers' Group rests on:

- A shared vision and priorities;
- Representativeness – in relation to members' background organisations;
- Internal coherence and consistency – the capacity to 'speak with one voice';
- Making full use of the group members' positions in various EESC bodies and tasks;
- Constructive engagement with members of other groups;
- Synergies with the ETUC and ETUFs;
- Active interaction and cooperation with civil society, EU institutions and other organisations: political visibility;
- General visibility via communication,

social media and public engagement.

The Workers' Group will continue to cooperate closely with the European Parliament, the European Commission and successive Council Presidencies to ensure that social considerations are integrated across policy areas.

We will work with the current and upcoming EU presidencies to advance social resilience, the just, green and digital transitions and social progress, strengthen social investment frameworks and embed upward convergence within the European Semester and broader economic governance structures.

SOCIAL CHALLENGES

Stronger EU action is needed in employment and social policies to ensure fundamental social, economic and territorial cohesion in the overall process of the twin ecological and digital transitions.

The European Union must return to a balanced vision of its social market economy model, based on the convergence between economic efficiency, social justice and environmental sustainability. Economic progress will not be sustainable without social progress. Sustainable productivity and competitiveness are key elements of a positive synthesis, built on investing in skills and lifelong learning, research and innovation, quality of work – including occupational health and safety and social dialogue, as well as the ability of companies and workers to adapt to economic and technological changes, including those related to artificial intelligence and energy challenges.

Sustainable competitiveness can only be envisaged from this productive, social and democratic base. It must enable Europe to produce better, more resource-efficient, more innovative and higher-value-added products and services, while ensuring quality jobs, strong social rights and a just transition for all workers and territories.

The principles of minimum wages, a guaranteed minimum income, access to lifelong learning, the eradication of child, youth and elder poverty, and comprehensive social protection covering all workers in every form of employment represent the key objectives of the Workers' Group across Europe. These objectives also extend to gender equality – through full implementation of the work-life balance directive; ending gender-based vio-

lence and harassment; empowerment of vulnerable women including older, migrant and refugee women and those with disabilities; and the mainstreaming of gender equality across all policy areas in the EU – and to the climate transition, including the pursuit of a climate-neutral economy that offers dignified employment for all. Together, they form the essential pillars of a sustainable European social and economic model.

While the European social model is rightly regarded as an example for much of the world, far too many people continue to suffer hardship or remain excluded from society because of poverty, discrimination, lack of education, or other structural disadvantages. The Workers' Group will continue to push for a fairer future for Europe. This includes strengthening social dialogue and collective bargaining, safeguarding the rule of law and fundamental rights – notably the rights to organise and to strike – and putting an end to union busting.

The European debate should not be about protection and economic efficiency, but about how to build efficient regulations that simultaneously enable innovation, the green transition, job quality, and economic and social security. Quality regulation is often a factor in long-term stability, confidence, investment and productivity gains.

Political agendas that have promoted deregulation and austerity continue to undermine the European social model and represent a fundamental threat to European social rights and protections. The 'Omnibus packages' pose a deeply concerning policy direction within the EU that prioritises market flexibility and fiscal restraint over shared prosperity. The European Commission remains silent on the calculation methods and the underlying evidence of the expected cost savings and lacks any published impact assessment of the proposed packages².

This puts into question the established pieces of legislation that represent hard-fought political victories of workers in European politics. At the same time, while regulatory simplification can in certain cases be justified, it must not come at the expense of fundamental values, workers' rights, or the transparency and involvement of trade unions. This deregulatory trajectory risks weakening the protection of workers, the environment and the credibility of the EU's social model³. Framed under competitiveness and simplification, this approach risks long-term social sustainability for short-term economic performance. Simplification should not be a pretext for deregulation.

Moreover, collective bargaining systems should be recognised as an effective and flexible alternative to detailed regulation. Well-functioning collective agreements benefit not only workers but also companies by providing predictable and sector-specific frameworks. Undermining these systems risks weakening both workers' protections and the stable conditions that businesses rely on.

KEY PROPOSALS

² https://commission.europa.eu/law/law-making-process/better-regulation/simplification-and-implementation/simplification_en.

³ <https://www.etuc.org/en/document/etuc-strategy-countering-deregulation>.

- **Ensure that all EU policies**, including the green and digital transitions, undergo social impact assessments.

- Continue promoting the **UN Sustainable Development Goals**: We strongly support and will keep pushing for the implementation of the only globally accepted framework that links decent jobs and social advancements with environmental protection and an economy that works for people and the planet. Our fight for **quality jobs** also means ensuring that everyone has the possibility to have decent working conditions. We will continue to combat unemployment and will not leave the long-term unemployed behind when there is so much useful social and environmental work to be done. We will continue to put workers' welfare and social justice at the centre of our activities and policy actions.

- **The European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR)** must continue to guide the European Commission, and the Workers' Group will fight for the full implementation of all 20 principles of the Pillar and for it to be properly integrated into the EU institutional framework. The EPSR must be transformed into a binding instrument through a Social Progress Protocol incorporated into the Treaties, putting an end to the primacy of economic freedoms over social rights. The EPSR Action Plan must serve as a mandatory roadmap with measurable objectives, and the national-level implementation of its initiatives must be systematically linked to the European Semester, which, in turn, should incorporate new indicators into the social scoreboard with concrete objectives for each EPSR principle, and follow up on progress through the action plan at national level. Where gaps still exist, new principles must be added — covering adequate pensions, quality jobs and the right to affordable housing — with explicit recognition in the action plan of the need for adequate and sufficient pensions that prevent old-age poverty and enable older people to participate fully in society, as well as the right to affordable, quality housing. Delivering the EPSR through a strong action plan must make economic governance fully

social and sustainable: we need to reduce inequalities, close the widening gap in the capital-labour income share, tackle wage inequality and the gender pay gap, and establish clear rules that ensure a level playing field and put an end to social dumping. The Semester should be the central instrument for monitoring indicators on collective bargaining coverage and on workers' participation in company decision-making bodies — in which a meaningful share of worker representatives should be encouraged — building on existing data such as Eurofound's Industrial Democracy Index. Economic governance through the Semester must have a clear overarching goal: reducing inequality through upward wage convergence across Europe.

- **Firmly oppose 'simplification'** through the Omnibus packages as a pretext to reopen and dilute EU regulation and legislation on corporate sustainability and accountability (CSDDD, CSRD and EU taxonomy). While proposed as a technical harmonisation of regulatory obligations, the Commission's proposals in fact interfere with the core regulatory substance around social and environmental standards of corporate activity, which risks deregulating worker protections⁴.

- **Quality and sustainable housing:** The right to affordable and sustainable housing is a fundamental right⁵ and the Workers' Group calls on the Commission to develop an action plan to ensure the effective implementation of this right, which should be formally enshrined in EU primary law, and develop concrete solutions with the involvement of civil society in the decision-making process. The Workers' Group calls for increased public investment in housing, an adaptation of fiscal rules and state aid to support these investments, as well as combatting the financialisation of housing and the negative impacts of short-term tourist rentals that exclude many workers from urban centres and tourist areas.

⁴ [JOINT STATEMENT The big EU deregulation. Disastrous Omnibus proposal erodes EU's corporate accountability commitments and slashes human rights and environmental protections, ECCJ.](#)

⁵ Principle 19 of the European Pillar of Social Rights focuses on the right to housing and the need to combat homelessness, ensuring that everyone has access to adequate housing and support services.

The green transition must also ensure that energy renovation requirements do not increase housing costs for the most vulnerable households.

- **The metropolitan housing crisis** is partially related to the depopulation of rural communities. The declining attractiveness, investment and opportunities in rural areas have driven people out of peripheral regions into the cities. Therefore, part of the housing strategy should focus on rural development, investment strategies and attracting people outside of large metropolitan cities. A key concern regarding affordable housing is the excessive burden that rent places on household incomes, with housing costs exceeding 25% of household income. These issues demand actionable solutions such as reference rent caps, subsidised social housing programmes, and possibly cooperatively run limited-profit housing.

- **Combatting homelessness** must remain a social policy priority for the EU. What is needed is a strategic shift in focus from managing homelessness to actually ending it. We consider it necessary to put in place an ambitious European strategy to combat homelessness, based on prevention, social inclusion and the goal of eradicating homelessness. This strategy should be underpinned by a Council Recommendation on homelessness. In this context the upcoming European Affordable Housing Initiative (2026-2027) should be reinforced, aimed at strengthening public investment, social housing and preventing homelessness.

- **Democratising work:** The participation of workers is essential for the success of the green and digital transitions. In times of accelerated change due to powerful drivers such as digitalisation and new waves of automation, and the challenge of climate change, structural weaknesses and deficiencies of the EU Acquis on information, consultation and participation of workers have become more visible. There is a need for a stronger and more ambitious framework that involves more than just a 'new start for social dialogue'.

That is why we advocate a stronger legal framework of information, consultation and participation of workers. Such a stronger European framework would require the following, in particular: mainstreaming workers' participation as a cross-cutting structural element in all European legislation and initiatives that have an impact on working and living conditions, and a regulatory framework that guarantees early information and consultation of workers in cross-border restructuring and prevents fraudulent practices and/or practices to circumvent legal requirements.

- **European Works Councils (EWCs):** Full implementation of the adopted Directive (EU) 2025/2450 on European Works Councils, ensuring an ambitious transposition by 2027 and strengthening EWCs' rights to information, consultation and participation in transnational restructuring. The transposition of the directive must be carried out in accordance with the realities and needs of transnational restructuring and reflect the need to equip EWCs with the necessary resources and competences to engage in transnational information and consultation on equal footing.

- **Board-level representation of workers:** Ensure a level playing field of workers' board-level participation and an approach that actively develops and promotes a mandatory minimum floor of participation rights and dynamic European minimum standards of representation rather than engaging in strategies to avoid such rights.

- **Collective bargaining:** Strengthening collective bargaining at all levels, including extending its coverage and restoring collective bargaining systems, particularly in Member States that were forced to decentralise collective bargaining in order to access financial assistance and economic adjustment programmes. Increasing collective bargaining coverage to at least 80%, in line with the Adequate Minimum Wages Directive, and incentivising collective bargaining by allowing trade unions in well-functioning national self-regulatory systems room to negotiate collective agreements. Trade unions' role in the man-

agement of the just transition must also be reinforced by strengthening democracy at work both at the national and European levels. Union busting should be prevented through the protection of social partners' rights, including (personal and digital) union access to workplaces, the right to organise, the right to bargain collectively and the right to strike. Negative impact and misuse by employers or company trade unions must be prevented. The scope of collective bargaining should be extended to include provisions for green clauses and ensuring that it is a fundamental part of any energy and digital transition-related measures.

- **Improve EU-level social dialogue** by ensuring political, financial and administrative support for social partners, including through capacity-building initiatives by including a network of coordinators in all directorates in the European Commission to promote social dialogue and by implementing social partner agreements via EU law. The European Industrial Strategy should systemically integrate industrial relations and social partner involvement in an inclusive and cooperative way while promoting the European strategic autonomy and a global competitive system based on the European social model. The Workers' Group also supports the inclusion of a Social Progress Protocol in the EU Treaties to guarantee that workers' rights, trade union rights and social rights take precedence over economic freedoms in the event of conflict. During this period, our programme must strengthen the European framework for the participation of workers at all levels and strengthen the momentum for the mobilisation of employees.

- **Jobs and working conditions:** The proposed Quality Jobs Act should become a binding framework that guides reforms to strengthen employment with rights, collective bargaining and the European Semester towards quality employment. It is also necessary to monitor and assess how new initiatives and packages produced by the Commission on competitiveness, economic security and strategic autonomy, all of which are priorities in the current cycle, might impact employment.

- **Digital transition in the workplace:** The digital transition and the emergence of telework as a central mode of production provide opportunities for work-life balance, but also many challenges regarding the right to disconnect and gender equality, among others. Artificial intelligence and Generative AI systems are going to bring about profound changes in the world of work and in labour markets. These developments create significant opportunities but also major challenges, as some jobs will disappear while new ones will emerge. Women's jobs are twice as likely to be affected as men's. This may create greater inequalities, leaving behind millions of workers. Stronger workers' bargaining power at all levels, with the ability to anticipate, negotiate and challenge the use and the choice of technologies, is a necessary tool to mitigate and avoid negative effects on workers.
- **There is an urgent need for active labour market policies,** particularly upskilling/reskilling of workers, within the framework of qualifications recognised in collective agreements, and opportunities for lifelong learning during paid working time.
- **There is a need for a European Directive for a Just Transition,** emphasising anticipation and management of change, with social dialogue and collective bargaining as guiding principles regulating new jobs resulting from the digital and green transition, paying particular attention to young workers in increasingly precarious situations.
- **Combatting all types of precarious work:** Platform workers and new forms of work in particular need a robust legal framework to cover them, which calls for ensuring an effective and ambitious implementation of the Platform Work Directive, currently under transposition, guaranteeing employment with rights, full social protection, transparency and worker control over algorithmic management. Furthermore, we must defend workers' right to disconnect and push for a reduction in working time while maintaining the same salary level and adjusting staff numbers via collective bargaining or legislation.
- **Reaffirming the fight for gender equality and against gender-based and homophobic violence:** The limited progress made by the

first European Strategy for LGBTIQ+ rights points towards the need for a new strategy that should set more ambitious targets and measurable results. At the same time, gender-based inequalities persist and remain an important priority. The Workers' Group supports the centrality of defending women's rights and access to health-care. This means fighting sex-based institutional violence across the EU and working towards the right for a woman to access abortion and other medical care across the EU, regardless of economic situation, religion or where she lives in the EU region in which she resides – as demonstrated in our support of the My Voice, My Choice initiative⁶.

- **Gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights in the workplace:** Gender gaps are persistent or even growing in different areas, including in family and working life. Recovery efforts that invest in the female workforce, tailored to each individual's needs, are necessary. Gender issues should be mainstreamed throughout all policy-making processes. As part of the EU Gender Equality Strategy, we push for the eradication of gender-based violence for all ages – including violence in the workplace through tools like the EU Directive on combatting violence against women and domestic violence, including rape, and by adding gender-based violence to the list of EU crimes.
- **The Union of Equality:** LGBTIQ+ Equality Strategy 2026–2030 should include a dedicated chapter on LGBTIQ+ rights in the workplace, including anti-discrimination measures, equality protocols, mandatory training and monitoring mechanisms.
- **The Racial Equality Directive:** We note that Directive 2000/43, which prohibits direct or indirect discrimination based on race, ethnic origin or

⁶ [EESC gives full support to My Voice, My Choice initiative | EESC](#).

national origin in access to employment, training and social protection, as well as with regard to working conditions and social benefits, has yet to be fully implemented everywhere. Racial discrimination in the workplace persists, manifested in several ways including disparities in career progression. This phenomenon is also compounded by existing gender inequalities. Equal pay for equal work is a fundamental principle, therefore, for our group, human resources policies and social dialogue addressing this issue must be prioritised within both trade unions and employer organisations and embraced by the social partners across all sectors of activity. The implementation of tools – such as the ‘point cloud’⁷ or the analysis and anonymisation of HR procedures – that help detect and prevent discrimination can prove useful. Addressing this issue is essential for social cohesion within the world of work and the EU as a whole. The European Commission must make this a priority, including in terms of funding initiatives aimed at combatting racism.

- **Preventing social dumping:** It is necessary to fight unfair competition and social dumping to enable fair labour mobility. An increase of resources and reach of labour inspections should be supported, including strengthening the mandate of the European Labour Authority with the capacity to act with initiative and investigative and sanctioning powers to combat social dumping and labour exploitation effectively, while respecting the autonomy of national social partners. This extends particularly to migrant workers who often work in ‘low-

skilled’ precarious jobs and are denied basic labour rights. To prevent social dumping and empower all workers, we should work alongside migrant workers to guarantee them fair wages and improve their working and living conditions.

- **Build on the success of SURE** to make it a permanent instrument to be prepared for future crises.

- **Poverty and social exclusion** are widening as new groups fall into hardship across many countries, making an integrated plan for the eradication of poverty essential. The Commission’s European Anti-Poverty Strategy must include binding targets linked to the European Semester, with indicators on in-work, child and energy poverty, and clear commitments to cut poverty by 2030. National social protection systems must be strengthened to protect the unemployed and the most vulnerable, while quality public services and sustained investment must tackle structural inequality. All workers, including the self-employed, must have access to adequate social security benefits, supported by clear rules on applicable legislation and effective cross-border enforcement. National minimum income schemes – often the last line of defence against poverty – must be reinforced across the EU, and both minimum wages and minimum income must be regularly adjusted to inflation to boost the working poor. The Child Guarantee must be fully implemented and ensuring the affordability of and universal access to food must remain a core social priority: hunger and food insecurity are a continuing scourge, food must not be treated as a speculative financial asset, and the financialisation of the food system calls for greater market transparency and a global windfall tax to counter oligopolistic control of supply and pricing.

- **Quality health services:** The health-care sector remains an economic activity of strategic and universal importance. Access to quality healthcare, prevention and early detection of diseases is a fundamental part of our model of society. To that end, it must be ensured that Member States invest adequately in public health and social care.

⁷ The ‘point cloud’ is an internal HR salary benchmarking tool that plots every employee according to their age and base salary, allowing HR and employees to compare an individual’s pay with others in similar roles, grades, job families, genders and business units, as well as with salaries in comparable high-tech companies. By reviewing this data, an employee can see whether their salary is above, below, or around the average for people in a similar situation. If their pay appears significantly lower than the benchmark, they can use this information to support a request for a salary adjustment, promotion-related increase, mobility-related raise, or to address potential pay inequities.

Appropriate measures must be taken to improve the working conditions and health and safety of healthcare workers.

- **A European Health Union:** COVID-19 drew attention to the fragmentation of the EU's health architecture. A genuine, inclusive European Health Union must go beyond crisis management and ultimately aim for a Europe where everyone enjoys the highest attainable health standard with equal access to high-quality treatment. It should initiate systemic change to be better prepared not only for the next pandemic but also for other cross-border health challenges, such as antimicrobial resistance, and the obesity and non-communicable disease epidemics affecting all European countries. It should also adopt the 'one health' approach, working on the link between human, animal and environmental well-being to preserve our health.

- **Tackling mental health problems:** Implement an EU mental health strategy by promoting a preventive approach and early detection and screening and providing a person-centred approach in the community.

- **Mental health in the workplace:** Precarious work, performance pressure and excessive workloads are driving a sharp rise in psycho-social risks and related mental health problems. We therefore call for the full implementation and enforcement of European and national legislation on quality, healthy and safe working conditions, and for a new EU directive to prevent and eradicate psycho-social risks at work. Compliance must be enforceable: businesses and organisations that fail to guarantee respect for this legislation should be debarred from public procurement tenders and public aid, in line with the existing EU Public Procurement Directives, because public money must not reward employers who put workers' mental and physical health at risk.

- **Intergenerational solidarity:** A high priority should be given to issues affecting young people, older people and active ageing. The Workers' Group recommends that the implementation of the Intergenerational Strategy explicitly take into account that its central objective is to reduce social,

economic, gender, age and territorial inequalities between generations, strengthen solidarity and social cohesion across generations to achieve democratic, resilient, inclusive and sustainable societies, and that intergenerational fairness is to be treated as a measurable outcome and not merely as a guiding principle. We stress the importance of involving young people not only in the labour market, but in society and in the policy-making process, by ensuring the implementation of the Youth Guarantee in all EU Member States. An intergenerational approach is needed to ensure quality traineeships and provide resources for active ageing.

- **Internships and traineeships:** All internships, traineeships and apprenticeships must be paid. The EU Directive on Quality Traineeships must deliver real progress for young people and ensure that traineeships are not used as a source of cheap or precarious labour. We expect the final directive to establish clear and enforceable standards on remuneration, social protection, learning content, supervision and duration. Traineeships must always be a pathway to quality employment, never a substitute for regular jobs. The directive must also include strong monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, prevent misuse by employers and ensure that all trainees – regardless of their status – benefit from decent working conditions and full labour rights.

- **Early childhood education:** Implement the Council Recommendation on the revision of the Barcelona targets on early childhood education and care.

- **Demographic change** impacts our social market economy and puts pressure on social systems, in part because of the changes in the composition of the labour market. The Workers' Group therefore sends a clear political message: Public statutory pension schemes remain and must be enhanced as the cornerstone of pension systems in the EU, providing European workers post-retirement income and playing a fundamental role in preventing poverty in old age.

- **Pensions:** Current legislative proposals under the Commission's Savings and In-

vestments Union Strategy aim to promote supplementary pensions through, for example, automatic enrolment in occupational pension funds, which are meant to address the sustainability of pensions and the gender pension gap⁸. However, these raise several concerns, including constitutional issues, encroachment on the autonomy of social partners, and the resulting reduction of public pensions (as we see in countries where such schemes exist) and an increased gender pension gap under occupational pension coverage⁹. While complementary pension schemes can contribute to retirement income, they must be intended as complements to adequate first-pillar statutory pensions. Developing supplementary pensions across the EU should not justify, directly or indirectly, weakening public pensions, especially as regards the adequacy of pensions. The cornerstone of more sustainable first-pillar, second-pillar and occupational pension schemes should be the implementation of ambitious policies on quality job creation, fair migration and gender equality, aimed at consolidating the financial resources necessary to provide security for the pensioners of today and tomorrow.

8 https://finance.ec.europa.eu/publications/commission-proposes-boost-supplementary-pensions-help-ensure-adequate-retirement-income_en.

9 [Exposing the Gap: Gender Inequality in Occupational Pension Coverage and Income Across Europe \(Institute of Labor Economics\)](#).

Services of General Interest

Services of general interest (SGIs) are the cornerstone of the European social model. For the EESC Workers' Group, SGIs, such as healthcare, elder care and childcare, education, social services, energy, water, sanitation and public transport, are a cornerstone of social rights, democracy, social cohesion and the European economy. They are anchored in the European Pillar of Social Rights, in particular Principle 20, and in EU primary law through Article 14 TFEU, and Protocol No 26 and Article 36 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Everyone in need should receive support in accessing these services.

Today, this right is increasingly being undermined. A growing number of people can no longer afford basic services. Housing, energy and mobility costs are rising sharply, access to care and healthcare is deteriorating, and territorial and social inequalities are deepening. This development is not inevitable. It is the result of political choices: years of underinvestment, liberalisation and privatisation have weakened public services, reduced democratic control and shifted costs and risks onto workers, users and vulnerable groups.

Unfortunately, in many cases, governments and local authorities are failing to fulfil their responsibility to ensure equal and full access to public services and, more broadly, services of general interest. On the one hand, services are being privatised and/or outsourced. On the other hand, fees for partially commercialised services are increasing. As a result, the situation of less affluent households is deteriorating. What is particularly unfair and short-sighted is that this limits equal opportunities for the youngest. In the long term, the human capital on which Europe's future depends will be weakened. Public service obligations, quality standards and universal accessibility remain the primary objectives.

The lack of appropriate action by public

authorities will lead to the erosion of states' capacity to govern effectively. This would result in citizens losing trust in states and local government. They could also lose faith that their taxes and fees are being spent appropriately. In the long term, they might lose the sense that it is worthwhile to continue supporting public institutions through taxation. This would fuel tax avoidance and favour far-right and populist political forces as well as those seeking liberalisation and increased social inequality.

The EESC's Workers' Group believes that a completely different public policy should be pursued. The state and local authorities must be active in developing services of general interest and traditional public services to fully assume their public responsibilities. It is necessary to strengthen the role of public authorities in planning, financing and delivering SGIs, including through direct awards and in-house provision, while ensuring democratic accountability. To this end, we call for stronger involvement of citizens and social partners, including trade unions, in the co-creation, governance, reform and modernisation of SGIs.

The Workers' Group calls for public policy to shift from austerity to adequate and sustainable public investment in SGIs, including healthcare, education, transport, energy and social services, safeguarding their capacity to support economic resilience and social cohesion and promoting public ownership of SGIs. Moreover, we also call for ensuring that public procurement in SGIs fully respects labour standards, collective agreements and social conditionality, preventing downward pressure on working conditions, and we support the introduction and strengthening of environmental conditions.

In addition, we call on public authorities to prevent the development of a 'two-speed' public service system, where the privileged have access to better quality services, while the less well-off receive low-quality

services or services delivered in a way that prevents them from accessing them. One example is healthcare, where waiting lists can be very long for those insured under basic social security, whereas privately insured patients enjoy faster access to treatments, thus resulting in blatant inequalities in health.

Ongoing digitalisation poses a challenge to the social fabric in the EU. It is essential to ensure that digitalisation of SGIs enhances the accessibility and quality of services without replacing human interaction where essential and avoids exclusion of vulnerable groups.

The situation of workers in sectors directly dependent on the state must be taken into account. There must be no situations where public sector workers face such poor working conditions that they are forced to give up their careers. The Workers' Group calls for high-quality working conditions in SGIs, including fair wages, collective bargaining coverage and adequate staffing levels, recognising that quality jobs are essential for quality services. This sector must set the standard for quality of employment in the private sector and must compete with it in such a way as to attract and retain skilled workers.

Letta's report on the future of the internal market acknowledged the negative impact of austerity measures and budget cuts on public administration and public services. The report highlighted the urgent need to address gaps in the provision of universal services, including in the field of education. The Workers' Group supports the report's recommendation for an action plan for high-quality services of general interest based on a holistic approach to SGIs instead of fragmented, sector-by-sector policies.

One of the key challenges is housing availability. Today, housing-related issues are among the main drivers of poverty, inequality and intergenerational tensions; there-

fore, housing has become a central policy concern for workers.

Member States must ensure that everyone has equal access to affordable and high-quality basic services. This is an issue of social justice: SGIs should be provided at prices that do not depend on the purchasing power of users, thus avoiding two-tier public services. The Workers' Group calls for a halt to further liberalisation and privatisation in core SGI sectors such as water, energy, housing, care and transport. Furthermore, there must also be adequate funding of SGIs. This requires sufficient financing through an exception from the Stability and Growth Pact for investment in public SGIs, so that these services can meet users' needs and thereby increase public satisfaction and trust in democracy. The Worker's Group promotes the active support for public provision, non-profit models and, where appropriate, re-municipalisation and strong public control, transparency and accountability in the organisation and delivery of SGIs and SGEIs. Strong, accessible and democratically governed services of general interest are not a cost but an investment in Europe's social cohesion, economic resilience and democratic future.



ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

The European Union faces economic risks that directly threaten workers: job insecurity, the rise of precarious work, the cost-of-living crisis and the increasingly visible effects of climate change. An ageing population is affecting the size of the labour supply and economic growth potential, which requires appropriate policy responses.

Added to this is an unstable geopolitical environment marked by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, strategic tensions that extend even to territories such as Greenland, and new US tariffs affecting key sectors. These developments underscore the need for coordinated European responses that strengthen the EU's economic and social resilience. In this new political cycle, the Commission has launched far-reaching reforms: the revision of the multiannual financial framework, the transformation of cohesion policy, the omnibus packages, the regulatory simplification agenda and the renewal of the EU's economic governance framework, all of which will shape the future direction of European economic policy.

However, these transformations cannot open the door to deregulation or justify shifting resources away from social investment to finance increased defence expenditure. The economic modernisation of the EU must guarantee quality jobs, public investment and territorial cohesion, and advance essential priorities such as the fight against tax dumping and tax evasion, as well as the establishment of fairer, more progressive and better coordinated tax systems in the EU, so that economic progress translates into greater social justice and better living conditions for workers.

Economic transformation must be governed through social dialogue and strengthened collective bargaining, anchored in fairness and translated into measurable social progress across all Member States.

The Workers' Group closely monitors topics related to productivity and competitiveness and welcomes initiatives aimed at reducing critical resource and energy dependency, tackling supply chain constraints and giving the EU more strategic autonomy. We must shape the economic reforms to ensure that the direction of change is determined by the needs of the people, rather than allowing large corporations to dictate the terms. The EU requires competitiveness, but it must also ensure that such competitiveness is based on sustainability, quality jobs, social cohesion and a just transition. Investment in social policy and public services is crucial for a sustainable growth model.

In a highly globalised and polarised world, the question of fair distribution of wealth and taxation remains a central policy debate. While the European model has succeeded in ensuring that the middle 40% and the bottom 50% of the population receive a larger share of income than in any other region of the world, Europe continues to face significant social and economic inequalities¹⁰. Wealth concentration remains high,

10 World Inequality Report (2025) <https://wir2026.wid.world/>.

public wealth has collapsed, and top wealth shares have continued to expand in recent decades as tax regimes struggle to find a way to effectively tax them. The OECD Pillar 2 framework shows increasing fragmentation, legal uncertainty and pressure to introduce exemptions that weaken its effective tax rate¹¹. The risks of undermining the efforts to combat profit shifting reduce the fiscal capacity needed to finance social protection, green and digital transition and public services. Therefore, ensuring that EU tax reforms deliver fair and effective taxation of multinational enterprises must be a priority.

KEY PROPOSALS

- **Fiscal governance and medium-term fiscal plans:** The new economic governance framework adopted in April 2024, introducing regulations on medium-term fiscal plans and a strengthened excessive debt procedure, will need to be reformed to better reflect the investment needs of our societies, with more credible targets, duties and obligations to avoid social regression. The reformed framework needs to ensure that European economic governance is truly geared towards prosperity, social cohesion and a just transition, including by treating public investment separately when deciding whether any excessive deficit procedure should be opened, to allow all Member States to undertake the public investments needed to address the common priorities. In addition, national plans should now be aligned with the new medium-term fiscal plans.
- **Implement the Stability and Growth Pact:** The Stability and Growth Pact has already been substantially reformed in 2024 as part of the broader revision of the EU economic governance framework, which introduced new medium-term fiscal-structural plans, a stronger focus on net expenditure rules and a reformed excessive deficit procedure. However, its implementation and

practical impact remain subject to ongoing political debate, particularly regarding the balance between fiscal discipline, public investment needs, social cohesion and the requirements of a just transition.

- **Make the European Semester social:** The European Semester must give equal weight to economic, employment and social objectives. It should support adequate public investment, strengthen workers' rights and fully integrate the European Pillar of Social Rights.
- **Addressing the social imbalances in the European Semester:** The European Semester must be complemented with instruments to address social imbalances. While the Social Convergence Framework has been implemented, the European Semester is still lacking. The social dimension of the European Semester must be strengthened by introducing a collective bargaining coverage indicator and linking it to the objectives of just transition and social progress.
- **Country-specific recommendations aligned with the agreed EU social objectives:** The European Semester should be fundamentally democratised, placing democratically accountable institutions and social partners at the centre of decision-making.
- **Inclusion of social partners:** Social partners, in particular trade unions, and civil society must be involved in the implementation of EU funds, including the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), cohesion policy instruments and national reform programmes with minimum consultation standards defined at the EU level, and other instruments under the multiannual financial framework (MFF). Currently, the rules are non-binding and social dialogue is left to the goodwill of the national governments. We therefore call for the establishment of binding conditionality for such consultation, as involvement varies between countries and regions.
- **SMEs represent an important cornerstone of the EU economy:** However, it is equally important that SMEs respect human rights and the environment in the conduct of their business, and that they are given the opportunity to unleash their potential

¹¹ Lee A. Sheppard (2025) Not GILTI and Pillar 2, part 2, Tax Notes International, Volume 120, Oct. 27.

to contribute to sustainable development, not just with jobs, but more importantly with fair wages, safe and healthy working conditions, democracy at work and high socio-environmental standards. These standards must be in line with workers' participation and the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive 2024, which introduces indirect obligations for SME suppliers, and the new SME Strategy 2025-2030, which reinforces the green and digital transitions.

- **Implementation of the Social Economy**

Action Plan: In its mid-term review in 2025, the Social Economy Action Plan integrates the social economy into the national reform programmes and broadens its access to financing through InvestEU and ESF+. Social enterprises represent around 10% of all enterprises in the EU. Implementing the Social Economy Action Plan will adapt the regulatory framework and increase the visibility of social economy enterprises, creating an environment in which they can thrive. This will include providing them with access to markets and finance and offering opportunities to start up and expand their activities. It will also provide public policy support for social enterprises on an equal footing with other forms of enterprise.

- **Taxes and the need for fiscal reform:** As detailed in the Letta report, the EU could lose out economically if it does not begin to harmonise its tax regimes¹². The fragmentation of tax regimes across Europe has facilitated tax evasion and avoidance by large firms in tax haven nations, while harming other countries through tax dumping. To combat these prevalent issues and build stronger solidarity and cooperation between our Member States, we must create a fair and just tax system. The tax regime must be progressive to ensure that each actor pays their fair share to the system and to ensure a more just distribution beyond the market-determined distribution of incomes. A credible EU fiscal reform should go hand in hand with institutional reform.

¹² Letta Report: p.111 Addressing Tax Fragmentation to Empower the Single Market.

Deeper political integration can strengthen the EU's capacity to deliver fairer outcomes, better public services and improved living and working conditions. The issue of tax and fiscal reform raises the question of political reform, which must be facilitated through a deepening of democratic institutions within the EU.

- **Tax on financial transactions:** A tax on financial transactions should be introduced at the EU level, building on the systems already in place in eight Member States, alongside a tax on digital transactions.

- **Fair and progressive taxation:** We call for the introduction of a progressive wealth tax to finance the necessary investments for financing social protection and for the just green and digital transitions. This would be an opportunity to ensure that those with the greatest wealth contribute fairly, combat tax evasion and avoidance, strengthen tax justice and provide new sources of revenue to finance public service, sustainable investment and quality employment.

- **Capital-oriented taxes:** We need a shift in taxation from one that is mostly labour-based to adapt to the new realities of capital-intensive businesses and not penalise labour-intensive ones. We advocate moving towards a higher minimum tax rate for multinationals, as we believe that the current rate of 15% is insufficient. The current Directive implementing the OECD Pillar 2 minimum effective taxation rules does not adequately close loopholes or provide full transparency, thus allowing some companies to avoid contributing fairly to the objective of tax justice. Not only would a robust minimum corporate tax level at the European level combat profit shifting, but also 'side-to-side' arrangements that risk creating parallel tax regimes, which undermine the level playing field.

- **Fight against tax fraud and tax optimisation:** The fight against tax fraud, tax evasion and money laundering must remain high on the agenda. We call for the immediate and reinforced implementation of the Anti-Aggressive Tax Planning Package, presented in 2025, to strengthen administrative cooperation and transparency and

promote fairer taxation.

- **Moving beyond unanimity**, as soon as possible, **in EU tax matters**: Qualified majority voting is needed in tax matters instead of unanimity, which is blocking any progress. We call for the activation of Article 116 TFEU, which offers a legal way forward on taxation when unanimity blocks measures necessary for the proper functioning of the internal market.
- **A strong common budget**: The EU needs a strong common budget to operate, including having sufficient own resources to pursue the necessary policies. While the European Commission in recent years has recognised the need to strengthen the EU's budgetary capacity to address the green, digital and demographic transitions, the new political cycle has not yet presented any concrete initiatives in this direction, and the current budget remains insufficient. The EU needs more resources to foster investment and sustainable growth, considering the problems derived from the very high energy costs that consumers and companies face in Europe. Ambitious measures such as a significant increase in own resources and finding new stable and progressive sources of financing are necessary to strengthen the current budget that will allow the EU to respond to the structural challenges it faces.
- **Multiannual financial framework 2028–2034**: The current proposal does not guarantee the resources needed to sustain the social, territorial and productive investment required by the ecological, digital and demographic transition. The budget remains too limited and lacks countercyclical capacity, threatening the stable financing of public services, social cohesion and quality employment. Furthermore, linking access to European funds to structural reforms and fiscal targets reproduces austerity mechanisms and places conditions on public investment.
- **MFF and cohesion**: Cohesion must remain a central pillar of the European project and must not be cut in the MFF 2028–2034, as this would jeopardise territorial convergence and a just transition. We reject

the approach of the ongoing reform, which involves a recentralisation of cohesion policy and its increasing subordination to the European Semester, thus shifting it towards short-term competitiveness objectives. This may weaken social, environmental and democratic controls and reduce the participation of social partners, collective bargaining and social dialogue. Furthermore, it would limit the autonomy of regions and municipalities and public investment capacity.

- **MFF and social conditionalities**: We must ensure that access to European funding is linked to social conditionalities, including clear collective bargaining conditions, and that companies that do not comply with labour rights are excluded from it. This social conditionality must be mandatory in all MFF 2028–2034 programmes, and monitoring of compliance with labour and trade union rights must be strengthened. However, the proposed macroeconomic conditionality, such as that of unrelated structural reform, is strongly opposed.
- **MFF and the European Social Fund**: The EU must revise the proposed ESF Regulation 2028–2034 to reintroduce ringfenced funding for social partner capacity building, including targeted support in Member States where social dialogue is weak, and ensure coherence with country-specific recommendations under the European Semester.
- **Towards a more social CAP for fair and sustainable agriculture in Europe**: The upcoming reforms to the common agricultural policy respond to the severe social, economic and environmental challenges facing European workers. The widespread use of precarious employment, unsafe working conditions, climate impacts and the financialisation of the food chain must be addressed. A sustainable and attractive agricultural sector can be achieved with strong social standards, union involvement and a CAP that delivers on the appropriate framework and investment needed. Strengthening social conditionality and labour protections can ensure full and effective prevention of illegal labour intermediation and abuses against workers, especially

migrant workers. Maintaining full funding and aligning the CAP to social objectives can promote the necessary changes needed in the agricultural sector, such as ameliorating labour conditions, which will make working in the sector more attractive for future generations, and improving business practices to be in line with climate goals and ecological practices. The CAP also upholds the livelihoods and working conditions of European farmers. At the same time, it must continue to ensure a stable supply of healthy and affordable food while safeguarding farmers' incomes and workers' rights.

- **MFF and the rule of law:** We must support the timely and full implementation of the rule of law conditionality mechanism alongside other tools and mechanisms aimed at protecting the EU's financial interests. This mechanism must be applied without exception and in a consistent manner.

- **A stronger MMF:** The current MFF plan is inadequate and needs much more resources, clear social conditions and more ambition overall. This cannot be achieved through CAP reduction, proposed multi-fund mergers and business-oriented simplification. Economic cohesion and social investments must remain central components of the funds and not be sidelined by budgetary priorities being geared towards competitiveness and defence.

- **Beyond GDP:** Well-chosen statistical indicators will be crucial for monitoring the progress towards achieving the SDGs and the objectives of the European Green Deal, as well as for steering the European Semester towards a genuine economy of well-being, equality and social cohesion. This can only be guaranteed when the social indicators incorporated into the European Semester have a real impact on the formulation of country-specific recommendations. Just measuring is not enough: the process must be strengthened through the full implementation of the Social Convergence Framework, which makes it possible to identify divergences, trigger alerts and guide policy action towards upward social convergence. Only in this way can the Semester guarantee effective progress in

well-being, equality, job quality and social cohesion.

- **Public procurement:** The ongoing revision of the Public Procurement Directive must establish mandatory social clauses in all public contracts, guarantee fair working conditions, strengthen gender equality and ensure effective monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, including reinforced sanctions. We call for public procurement that promotes quality employment by ensuring that public administration contracts promote collective bargaining, social dialogue and gender equality, avoiding downward competition in wages and labour rights, and strengthen in-house and direct procurement as well as public-public cooperation.

- **Green transition:** Despite the turbulence that has followed the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and the current geo-strategic and geoeconomic tensions, efforts towards a more sustainable and socially inclusive economic model, the Sustainable Development Goals and, in particular, towards the transition to a green model of growth must continue. The transition to the European Green Deal, if fairly implemented, creates a particular opportunity for the development of businesses based on the social economy model. The reinforcement of the European Green Deal through the Net-Zero Industry Act, the Critical Raw Materials Act and the Green Deal Industrial Plan will only be legitimate if it guarantees a truly just transition. Any green industrial policy must incorporate binding social clauses, effective trade union participation, quality employment, gender equality and fair working conditions as requirements for access to public funding and aid. The ecological transition must not be built at the expense of workers, but with them and for them.

- **Sustainable finance:** The necessary financial resources need to be redirected towards sustainable investments with a long-term approach, which takes into account environmental, social and governance aspects and policies. We call for the update of the EU's sustainable finance framework

to fully incorporate social and labour criteria, guaranteeing quality employment, respect for collective bargaining, gender equality and protection of human rights throughout the value chain.

- **No greenwashing:** Sustainable finance must have strict rules against greenwashing and greater transparency and governance that includes trade union participation. The green transition will only be fair if the social dimension is integrated as a binding requirement in the taxonomy for all sustainable investments and should be extended to the concept of sustainable competitiveness.
- **ESRS and CSRD:** The European Sustainability Reporting Standards under the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive aim to combat greenwashing and, although they represent progress, they must be complemented by a genuine social taxonomy and trade union participation in investment governance to ensure a just transition.
- **Easier access to capital:** There should be a focus on facilitating access to capital for companies that are in transition and demonstrate efforts to become more sustainable. The current taxonomy is very restrictive, making it harder for companies.
- **Sustainable competitiveness:** Sustainable competitiveness is based on the well-being of everyone, social progress, equity, stabilised resilience, environmental sustainability and productivity. Sustainable competitiveness applies to all institutions and all players in economic development: independent workers, enterprises (micro enterprises, SMEs, social enterprises, large enterprises, European champions), workers, the public sector (at national, regional and local levels), and policies and factors that determine the level of productivity. Sustainable competitiveness is therefore a key priority for workers, and for people in general: it ensures that competitiveness is a process that improves society, rather than a race to the bottom. It is better for everyone in the long run, as everyone needs the planet to survive. It is also in the interest of employers, too: not only does it help them have environmental and social stability, but

it also encourages fair competition and respects the work of honest companies.

- **Sustainable investment:** Investment is critical for a sustainable economic growth model in line with the twin transitions. The levels needed, however, cannot be attained with the current EU-wide cutbacks to investment. The accelerated fiscal consolidation of the new economic governance framework limits the space for public investment. That is why additional European financing mechanisms must be created.
- **A social taxonomy for sustainable investment:** The taxonomy system should follow not only ecological, but also social criteria, providing a reliable taxonomy which makes companies that contribute to social sustainability more visible.
- **A 'social and climate golden rule'** should be introduced to exclude investments essential for the green, digital and social transition from the deficit calculation.
- **Limit unfair trading practices:** We will advocate the improvement of the Unfair Trading Practices Directive, including a ban on sales below production costs. This directive is an important instrument when it comes to countering the price pressure on suppliers in the agricultural and food sector. An improved directive would counter one of the employers' preferred arguments in collective bargaining, namely that a pay rise is not possible because retailers are squeezing them through unfair practices. We will fight for at least the following key points: on scope, the protective effect of the directive must apply to all companies, whatever their size; on unfair practices, they must all be prohibited through a general clause, with selling below production cost explicitly prohibited; and on enforcement, more inspections and more effective enforcement mechanisms are needed.
- **Savings and Investments Union:** The still-pending Savings and Investments Union continues to be primarily geared towards the interests of investors and does not guarantee stable financing for the real economy or quality employment. We argue that green and social bonds should be subject to strict social criteria to avoid

greenwashing and ensure real benefits for working people. However, the Savings and Investments Union must not deregulate or destabilise our pension systems.

- **The Banking Union:** The Banking Union remains incomplete due to the absence of a European Deposit Guarantee Scheme, and it is essential to move towards a financial architecture that prioritises stability, consumer protection and labour rights.

- **No deregulation:** There are credible risks of deregulation, such as through the Omnibus packages, that represent a huge risk to the current safeguards in place to defend workers' rights and environmental and consumer protections.

- **Cost of living:** The cost-of-living crisis must be addressed. Reinforcing social dialogue and collective bargaining are central tools to improving wages and working conditions, and ensuring productivity gains translate into fair pay. At the same time, appropriate pricing policies, including price caps in key sectors such as energy, are necessary to curb excess profits and prevent households from bearing disproportionate costs.

- **Closing the productivity gap:** The ever-growing productivity gap that has opened up between the US and the EU must be acknowledged, as well as the implications if it continues to expand. Developing a socially and environmentally sustainable route to overcoming the venture capital and consequent innovation deficit is key to closing the productivity gap.



ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

The green transition, decarbonisation and the circular economy, along with digitalisation, are all having an impact on the world of work in terms of changing the nature of jobs and tasks and creating new occupations, while eliminating others. These transitions are interlinked and mutually reinforcing.

Although policies to combat climate change can lead to major socio-economic changes, social progress is not possible without sustained economic progress, and the latter cannot take place without a fair and just transition. At the same time, maintaining, modernising and greening Europe's industrial base and competitiveness is essential to ensure that the transition creates and retains quality jobs within the EU and avoids deindustrialisation or carbon leakage, in line with the Net-Zero Industry Act and the Critical Raw Materials Act. If a socially just transition is not achieved, it risks making the green transition the target of social backlash. Democratic legitimacy and quality of life are central to achieving a strong transition, and if such a transition does not recognise and work to address the concerns of working people, then populist anti-Green Deal narratives will find fertile ground for growth.

To make the twin green and digital transition socially just, so that it leads to a fairer, greener and more digital society, we need to create the necessary social and legal framework. If we can do this, we can create and sustain quality jobs (i.e. jobs with fair wages, job security, safe working conditions and strong collective rights) that enable a good life for everyone – in the EU and beyond. The EU has already taken a number of initiatives in the areas of dig-

italisation and climate protection, such as the AI Act, the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act on the one hand, and the EU Climate Law, the Fit for 55 package and REPowerEU on the other, to name just a few. More recently, the EU has advanced the implementation of these and launched additional initiatives under the European Green Deal and Digital Decade agenda. However, stronger coherence between digital, industrial and climate policies is still needed. Nevertheless, much remains to be done, and significant challenges remain to achieve the goal of climate neutrality by 2050 and in delivering a strong socially just digital and green transition.

Still, the EU must work harder to put people at the heart of the green and digital transitions. Both national and European legislation still focus far too little on people and how their everyday lives and, above all, their work will be changed by the green and digital transformation. This includes the impact of algorithmic management, platform work and AI-driven workplace changes in emerging green sectors. For this to change in the future, we need to establish legislation that ensures that worker representatives are involved in the aforementioned transformation processes as early and as closely as possible. This is not only in the interest of workers but also of companies, as it reduces asymmetries between sectors, regions

and labour market groups, and helps avoid a two-speed transition between urban and rural areas, core and peripheral sectors, and large companies and SMEs.

Experiences so far show that transition processes that involve, at all levels, the social partners are more likely to succeed in terms of socio-economic justice. It is therefore necessary to work together on a comprehensive approach that reinforces investment policies, as well as social compensation policies, for the benefit of the most vulnerable households. Well-functioning and adequately funded public services (including education, healthcare and social protection systems) must be recognised as a key enabler of a just transition and funded appropriately. Industrial, labour and social protection measures must prevail, accompanied by lifelong learning, re-skilling and upskilling rights, including paid training leave, to ensure quality job creation and retention.

The challenge is to ensure the integration of social partners at the different levels of governance, including participation in the design and monitoring, with particular attention to the local and regional level.

Another key objective is ensuring workers' protection and participation in the socially just management of the ecological transition at company level. Collective agreements must include provisions for a just transition at business level, including mechanisms for restructuring anticipation and worker protection. This should include the development of just transition measures and social protection tools adapted to transition-related risks.

Therefore, we must ensure that the territorial green transition plans are accompanied by fair social concertation agreements and green collective agreements with a gender mainstreaming perspective. Attention should be given to addressing gender inequalities, occupational segregation and unequal access to emerging green and digital

jobs. The creation and protection of quality sustainable employment, as well as the support of people, are necessary conditions for companies to have access to financing for the green and socially just transition. In short, there must be no green transition without quality jobs and social progress.

Labour market forecasts highlight a significant skills mismatch and shortage in green and digital skills, which particularly affects vulnerable groups. Labour mobility and fair migration pathways should also be considered as part of the solution to address labour shortages, while ensuring equal treatment and protection of mobile workers. Access to qualifications to meet these challenges must become a real right for all people, based on validated and certified training in digital and green skills.

In this framework, social dialogue and collective bargaining are essential to be able to adjust retraining programmes to the real needs arising from the twin transition, ensuring that everyone has the right to access training programmes through paid leave. Social dialogue also plays a role in setting decent working conditions and wages and delivering job security, and investment in technology and collective bargaining should be positioned as a tool for boosting the implementation of the twin transition, as social partners are the actors of support in this regard.

Social dialogue is also highly relevant to the less visible moves to green production in companies across the economy, which involve adapting work organisation, job profiles and skills strategies.

Paid training leave and working time arrangements, including the reduction of working time where appropriate and negotiated, should be considered key instruments to support a fair transition and increase labour market participation, particularly for women.

The success of the green and digital tran-

sition will depend to a large extent on the policies that are put in place. Therefore, the move towards a green economy is, in addition to the obvious positive impact on the environment, a great opportunity to improve labour standards through social agreements between the social partners for a just transition. At the same time, particular attention must be given to SMEs, which face specific challenges in terms of financial capacity, administrative burden and access to training. Targeted support mechanisms, simplified access to funding and advisory services are essential. Equally, communication and public understanding of the twin transition must be strengthened through a fair transition narrative focused on social justice, resilience and competitiveness with quality jobs.

Experience suggests that negotiated outcomes can be more balanced and sustainable, and that giving an effective voice to those directly affected contributes to better-designed jobs.

Additionally, the Workers' Group supports the development of a strong EU just transition framework to ensure coherence across policies, avoid a two-speed transition and guarantee that industrial transformation is socially fair, territorially balanced and gender-equal, while fully embedding the principle that the green transition must go hand in hand with social progress and quality employment.

KEY PROPOSALS

- **Sustainability in light of a just transition** must be implemented through a cross-cutting approach that includes environmental, economic and social sustainability, and integrates the principles of the EPSR. Throughout this process, the protection of the rule of law and fundamental rights must remain a priority. A just transition cannot be limited to compensation mechanisms or carbon-intensive sectors only. There is a need for a strong Just

Transition Directive that integrates economy-wide obligations, including SMEs, services, agriculture and non-standard work.

- **Green Deal** measures need the support of workers and social dialogue and must be grounded in strong social dialogue and collective bargaining.
- **Preparing workers for the just transition:** Improving broad access to reskilling and upskilling for all workers, complemented with paid training leave, ensuring a strong supply of quality jobs when the jobs are needed in emerging and transforming sectors, and providing adequate income and social protection measures for workers most affected.
- **Social dialogue as a part of the just and green transition:** Companies should create just transition and decarbonisation plans in close cooperation with worker representatives and trade unions, guaranteeing social protection of all workers involved in the process, especially women, young people and marginalised groups, as well as safeguarding the workers' voice, information, consultation and participation. Collective bargaining should be a key instrument for managing industrial change, including through the designation of environmental transition representatives in workplaces.
- **Extension of the just transition measures** to sectors such as agriculture, services and industry is essential to ensure an economy-wide approach.
- **Support vulnerable groups and areas affected by climate change** through prevention, adaptation and financial mechanisms at EU, national and regional level.
- **Linking the Green Deal to a sustainable and just industrial and investment strategy:** Strengthen the link between the Green Deal and an ambitious European industrial strategy to ensure competitiveness, strategic autonomy and quality job creation in Europe.
- **Acknowledging SGIs** as a main driver for a just transition and strengthening and funding them accordingly as part of resilient and inclusive economies.
- **Acknowledging the importance of public funding and planning for 'green**

industries' and the benefits for the citizens in return to foster and promote acceptance for the Green Deal and to strengthen the EU's industrial base.

- **A new framework for investment and green procurement** must be developed: Public funding should be conditional on social and environmental criteria ('no public money without social and environmental conditionality').
- **EU-level frameworks for a just transition:** We need a deep reform of the electricity market to ensure affordability, security of supply and support for decarbonisation.
- **Monitoring the implementation of the Just Transition Fund and the Social Climate Fund:** Their size and accessibility should be increased, including for SMEs and vulnerable regions.
- **A European Directive for a Just Transition in the Workplace**, with binding obligations, social dialogue and enforcement mechanisms to protect workers in the process.
- **Strengthening governance and monitoring systems**, including a formal and meaningful role for social partners at the EU, national and regional levels, with clear indicators and accountability mechanisms linked to policy outcomes
- **Developing indicators** on the use of public funds, with sanctions for non-compliance.
- **Addressing regional imbalances** (particularly with coal-dependent regions in the EU): Creating recovery plans for coal regions, providing targeted support for crisis-affected regions, and strengthening the role of regional and local authorities. This also includes the outermost regions, which face specific structural and economic constraints and are often the most vulnerable to climate change.
- **Integrating the external dimension of the just transition**, ensuring that EU policies support sustainable development and fair transitions in partner countries and global supply chains. This means that all trade agreements must integrate Green Deal objectives, the Paris Agreement, and

human rights and labour standards.

- **Advancing a stronger just transition framework:** Moving beyond financial compensation towards structural rights, introducing economy-wide obligations and anticipatory policies, creating a binding EU-level framework with enforcement and conditionality to ensure a socially fair, gender-equal and territorially balanced transition.





DIGITAL TRANSITION

The digital landscape is rapidly reshaping the foundations of work and social relations, compelling us to confront critical questions about the future of labour in an increasingly digital and automated world.

Within this paradigm, European workers emerge as central actors in shaping the trajectory of the digital transition.

Although it has undoubtedly brought about economic and societal benefits for employees, such as increased flexibility, autonomy and opportunities for achieving work-life balance, it has also created an undesirable work culture where workers are pressured to be continuously available and connected for work-related requests and has opened the way to increased worker surveillance and the continuous intensification of work. These harmful consequences on workers need to be addressed.

Among the new forms of labour created by the digital transition, platform work is experiencing rapid growth in Europe. Unfortunately, it frequently results in low and unpredictable income, lacking the same level of protection and rights afforded to traditional employment. Platform workers often operate in isolation, facing limited opportunities to voice concerns directly. These challenges are further exacerbated by algorithmic management tools, which monitor and discipline workers, and have been shown to penalise workers suspected of engaging in union activity.

The growing market power of large digital platforms has signalled the need to put data at the forefront as a priority concern. Issues such as data concentration, monop-

olistic control over digital infrastructures, and access to public-interest and common data resources are increasingly shaping economic structures, labour relations and democratic governance. Addressing platform dominance and data governance is therefore essential to prevent further market concentration, power imbalances and new forms of inequality in the digital economy.

KEY PROPOSALS

- **Protecting quality jobs and working conditions.**
- **Protecting platform workers:** Implement an ambitious expansion of the Platform Work Directive, ban zero-hour contracts and bogus self-employment in all sectors and fight all types of precarious work. Platform workers and new forms of work in particular need an updated legal framework to cover them, with particular attention to young and migrant workers who constitute most of the workforce on the platforms. The directive has to be extended to all workers when algorithmic management practices are concerned, if no additional legislation is put forward to address the different situations. No decision impacting workers' lives or workers' conditions should be taken solely by machines. The human-in-command approach must be applied.
- **Digital working conditions:** Ensure workers' right to disconnect, end the 'bring

your own device' mandate and provide adequate software and hardware, establish minimum standards for telework.

- **Digital literacy at work:** Active labour market policies, upskilling and reskilling of workers and lifelong learning during working time.
- **Bridging the digital gap:** Increase the digital literacy of vulnerable groups and make digitalisation accessible regardless of age, gender, socio-economic status or disability. Promote lifelong learning and the participation of women in digital training and protect access to the internet as a fundamental right.
- **Acknowledge that digital infrastructure and services are part of services of general interest.** Accordingly, democratic oversight, public ownership, security and access must be promoted and expanded. Reduce dependencies and promote EU solutions where possible, and promote the development, use and proliferation of open-source software.
- **Foster data protection and protect online privacy:** Combat discrimination and develop mechanisms to increase online safety for everyone.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE – FOSTERING THE OPPORTUNITIES WHILE PREVENTING AND MANAGING THE RISKS

Artificial intelligence opens up great opportunities, but progress in the sector is advancing at lightning speed, bringing multiple potential risks for workers, the climate, society, democracy and more. The use of AI has to be regulated to ensure a human-in-command approach. The absence of social dialogue must be urgently addressed because workers should have the proper tools to face these challenges and remain in the labour market. Some jobs will disappear, and many of them will undergo deep transformations. While these changes will require new skills and training, AI should enhance human labour, rather than substi-

tuting it. AI also poses threats to people who face digital poverty (low income, lack of digital skills, disabilities, etc.). The idea of leaving no one behind should also extend to the use of AI in digital services.

Another key issue is ethics: in order to avoid manipulation of our democracies, but also to uphold transparency and fairness as well as the protection of the individual in all social and economic scenarios, AI use must be transparent and regulated.

The long-term sustainability of AI remains a crucial intersecting issue. The climate crisis and critical issues around water resilience remain major challenges for current and future generations. The development and use of AI remain extremely demanding on our resources. The accelerated use of rare minerals, water and electricity is accelerating environmental degradation in the name of competitiveness.

The Commission's Digital Omnibus Regulation proposal aims to improve the competitiveness of European technological companies, in particular AI companies. However, this proposal seriously risks infringing on personal data protection, as the Omnibus relaxes controls on data usage and rights, including for high-risk tools¹³. This risks reversing hard-won data protection standards and undermining workers' rights, workplace democracy and gender equality, while creating legal uncertainty and weakening legislation. It seriously calls into question the standards set by the existing EU legislation, such as the GDPR, the AI Act and labour-law safeguards. This, combined with the Corporate Due Diligence Omnibus, compounds these risks as safeguards and responsibility mechanisms are stripped.

Considering the fundamental transformation AI presents, our collective responsibility – that of trade unions, businesses, public authorities and civil society – is to

¹³ <https://www.bruegel.org/first-glance/eu-ropean-commissions-digital-omnibus-could-increase-risks-not-growth>.

anticipate the social and economic risks it generates.

The transition to AI cannot be limited to a logic of cost reduction. It must be accompanied by an ambitious social policy framework.

KEY PROPOSALS

- **Human-in-command:** Transversal implementation of the principle of meaningful human control, which ensures that a human must always be the one who makes the final decisions and that every action generated by AI can be monitored by a human.
- **Anticipate labour transformations:** Identify jobs at risk, map possible transitions and manage change, establish mechanisms for upskilling, reskilling and labour mobility. Prevent an intergenerational divide on AI.
- **Privacy protection:** Ban the use of AI for biometric surveillance, emotion recognition and predictive policing, call for disclosure of AI content in text production and for a correct definition of risks. The data protections won under the GDPR, the AI Act and the Platform Work Directive should be appropriately expanded to cover all workers working under increasingly automated and data-intensive work environments. This includes the rejection of the Digital Omnibus package and any deregulation of data protections.
- **Transparency:** Guarantee transparency of any use of AI and its algorithms in any process. Guarantee equal rights of access to digital services in systems which are using AI.
- **Legislation on AI** must also guarantee an independent audit of any AI use for the evaluation and/or recruitment of staff, which explicitly includes non-discrimination and the protection of workers' rights. Independent review and complaints mechanisms must ensure compliance with the specific requirements in the workplace.
- **AI in the workplace:** A specific directive that regulates the use of AI in the workplace and that guarantees the role of social partners ('when AI is used, workers must be on board') is needed. It must guarantee AI systems in which humans remain in control and which comply with labour rights, and a sound use of personal data. Trade unions and workers' representatives must be key actors in developing and implementing AI systems and must be consulted and informed prior to the introduction of digital technologies that impact working conditions. Adapting health and safety systems to the context and the work environment.
- **AI and social progress:** The result of AI taking on human tasks should be reduced working time (without salary reduction) or higher wages, and better work-life balance, not layoffs or additional production for its own sake. It is necessary to push for the benefits of AI to be shared fairly and ethically through regulation and public policies; structure the social security system to take into account atypical working time and precarity of jobs and adapt the pension system to the flexibility imposed by AI; and ensure fair value distribution of productivity gains.
- **AI and societal change:** Encourage dialogue between employers, trade unions and the education system to ensure the necessary skills for the transformation of work. Protect against foreign interference in democratic processes using technical and regulatory measures, without stifling free speech. Create a European fund for reskilling and social innovation, financed by major AI actors, making access to EU funding and public procurement conditional on contribution to this fund.
- **Sustainability:** Energy and water consumption, pressure on local infrastructure and competition for land must be taken seriously, without serving only local interests or externalising environmental costs. The Workers' Group calls for an EU legal framework setting out minimum standards for environmental and resource protection which ensures the further expansion of renewable and low-carbon energy, transparency and democratic participation and guarantees fair distribution of burdens and benefits.

- **Due diligence:** 'Clickworkers' are responsible for the development and enhancement of AI models. They often face precarious working conditions in the Global South. Their work must be subject to strict obligations, health and safety measures and safety standards. There should be a targeted focus on bringing 'clickwork' back onshore, particularly in sensitive sectors. AI should be integrated into CSR and sustainability strategies and included in corporate CSR reports and carbon footprints, promoting lighter models for non-critical uses, limiting unnecessary AI usage (e.g. disabling AI agents outside working hours), and valuing the relational economy.
- **Withdraw the Digital Omnibus package** as it represents a massive deregulation of European digital and data protection standards and thus jeopardises fundamental rights and social protection standards. Instead, the Workers' Group calls for further protections, ensuring digital autonomy, public control, oversight and stronger public and worker involvement in decisions about promotion, development and deployment of AI tools.
- Finally, Europe should support **sectors where the human factor remains essential** – health, education, crafts, culture – placing these professions at the centre of its future economic model and promoting generative AI as a tool serving social progress, not the reverse.



INDUSTRIAL CHANGE

Industrial change in Europe is accelerating, driven by the twin green and digital transitions, geopolitical shifts and the reconfiguration of global supply chains. This transformation is reshaping industrial ecosystems, employment structures and regional development patterns. While it creates opportunities for innovation and sustainable growth, it also entails significant risks of job displacement, rising inequalities and territorial divergence if not actively shaped. Moreover, current political developments casting doubt on the future of green policies are increasing uncertainty for industry and putting innovation and jobs at risk as the course of the green transition remains unclear.

A successful industrial transformation, therefore, requires a strong European industrial policy that actively steers investment and market developments, combines competitiveness with social justice, ensures binding worker participation and guarantees that no worker or region is left behind.

KEY PROPOSALS

- **EU industrial policy:** Develop a comprehensive EU industrial policy combining public and private investment, which strengthens European industrial capacities in strategic sectors and ensures that the twin green and digital transitions deliver quality jobs, social progress and territorial cohesion, in line with the Clean Industrial Deal and the broader EU industrial strategy. Ensure that industrial competitiveness strategies are fully aligned with social and environmental objectives through enforceable standards, including the promotion of quality employment, collective bargaining coverage and fair wages, preventing any

race to the bottom in labour and social standards.

- **Industrial restructuring:** Anticipate and manage industrial restructuring related to decarbonisation, digitalisation and global competition by guaranteeing early information, consultation and participation of workers and trade unions, including the obligation for companies receiving public support to engage in anticipatory social dialogue and negotiated transition pathways at company and sectoral level.
- **Affordable energy for industry:** Ensure affordable, stable and sustainable energy for industry, while attaching conditions to public support that safeguard employment, avoid windfall profits and guarantee reinvestment in decarbonisation and workforce transition, particularly in energy-intensive sectors.
- **Made in the EU:** Promote a 'Made in Europe' approach in strategic sectors (including clean technologies, critical raw materials and digital infrastructure), based on high social and environmental standards, strengthening European industrial resilience

while preventing social dumping across and within value chains.

- **Social conditionality in EU industrial funding:** Make it binding and operational (including in State aid, InvestEU and future industrial instruments), by systematically linking public support to respect for workers' rights and collective agreements, minimum standards on job quality, binding training and reskilling commitments and negotiated just transition plans with trade union involvement.
- **Strengthen labour standards** and social dialogue across strategic value chains, ensuring that industrial policy contributes to upward convergence and integrates workers' participation at all levels of governance. Use public procurement as a strategic tool to support quality jobs, collective agreements and sustainable industrial development, ensuring that public spending drives high social and environmental standards. Reinforce the link between industrial and skills policies, including a right to training, paid training time, reskilling and career development, and ensuring joint governance of skills strategies with social partners to enable workers to benefit from industrial transformation.
- **Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive:** Ensuring the full and ambitious transposition of the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive by 2028, and calling on the Commission to adopt strong guidance and delegated or implementing acts, where required, to guarantee the effective protection of human rights, labour rights and the environment throughout global value chains, while opposing any further weakening of the directive that would undermine its objectives.
- **Regulation on prohibiting products** made with forced labour on the EU market: Ensuring the effective implementation of the EU Forced Labour Product Regulation, already in force, by equipping the Commission's new enforcement structures with sufficient resources and ensuring full operational capacity ahead of its 2027 application.

MIGRATION

Migration has become one of the main political divides in recent times, as far-right parties attempt to capitalise on it to gain support and push their narratives. The migration flows we witness are often due to problematic economic, social and political situations in many countries, sometimes reaching catastrophic levels. Many of these countries, particularly in Africa, have a complicated relationship with many European countries and suffer from a legacy of post-colonial problems, cold-war-related conflicts, or both.

This leads to the arrival of migrants at certain EU border countries such as Italy, Greece and Spain, where the pressure on resources is high and the standards at the reception facilities tend to be low. Moreover, there is an unwillingness of certain EU countries to share the responsibility of taking care of migrants – lack of solidarity not only towards migrants but between EU Member States as well. Regarding the rescue missions in the Mediterranean, there is a lack of cooperation mechanisms between Member States to manage rescues operated by private vessels and implement effective search and rescue systems in European seas. Moreover, the reluctance of governments to let in boats carrying migrants poses a major humanitarian challenge. Human smuggling and trafficking networks must also be taken into consideration and tackled to develop safe, legal, quick and realistic pathways for immigration.

Migration flows into the EU are not massive in scale. They are a reality resulting from the EU's appeal in terms of economic opportunities, employment and welfare for people from impoverished and war/conflict-torn countries. The far-right rhetoric does, however, speak of massive flows in order to portray immigration as a threat. Far-right, Eurosceptic parties have taken on immigration as a major item in their electoral programmes, and are enjoying increasing

support across the EU, campaigning against not just the EU, but also democracy and human rights. Therefore, the question of migration and refugees and asylum seekers cannot be ignored.

It is very important to distinguish between different flows of population based on the underlying causes and to avoid confusion: people who are fleeing and seeking protection in the EU for political, ethnic, ideological or religious reasons (asylum seekers and refugees) and who must be protected under international law (the Geneva Convention) as opposed to those seeking to improve their standard of living and personal comfort in economic and employment terms (economic migrants).

Inward migration is ultimately a major driver of economic growth in the host countries and potentially of sustainable development. In the context of demographic decline in Europe and the need to refresh the working-age population, inward migration may prove itself essential. Therefore, proper integration and inclusion of all migrants, including asylum seekers, refugees and undocumented migrants in society and the labour market are important priorities for the Workers' Group, not forgetting that integration is a two-way process that also involves host European societies and their institutions.

To ensure the most effective asylum policies and enable people fleeing war and persecution to find a safe haven and safe and legal pathways to reach Europe, appropriate policy-making processes are needed based on respect for human rights and the value of human life. At the same time, these processes must take into account real labour force gaps and shortages throughout the EU. Some labour market gaps are based on poor labour conditions in certain labour sectors and jobs. The lack of decent working conditions means that these jobs are not being filled by workers, European or non-European, who are already in the labour market.

Solidarity means that all Member States have to share responsibilities, and that Member States with external borders should not be left carrying the burden alone. A new mechanism, in line with the principle of solidarity, should be introduced to determine the Member State responsible for dealing with an asylum request. In that context, Member States should not get the opportunity to hide behind a return sponsorship scheme.

These measures must be coupled with support for Member States on the EU borders and effective cooperation mechanisms, in line with the principle of solidarity, along with a long-term plan to provide stability, democracy and prosperity to the EU neighbourhood and beyond.

KEY PROPOSALS

- **The principle is and will always be that of human dignity** and human rights. Immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers are not numbers, political pressures or administrative procedures: they are people with rights, hopes, abilities, will and potential to contribute to the societies that welcome them and, simultaneously, to their country of origin. The way to apply these principles is to defend the fundamental rights and international standards for the protection of

immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

- **Cooperation to fight the structural causes of forced migration** between governments and social partners in the EU and third countries, especially in the Mediterranean, Eastern Neighbourhood and Sub-Saharan countries. Strengthen cooperation (political and economic) with countries of origin to reinforce the national economy, provide assistance in education and vocational training, State administration, etc. as stated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Part of combatting the root causes of economic migration should be reevaluating the economic policies that EU Member States have with countries of origin, including, when applicable, reviewing legacy post-colonial agreements and corporate practices that do not contribute to the development of these countries or that consolidate inequalities and regional tensions. The effects of brain drain on the countries of origin and its consequences should also be taken into account.

- **Public information policy** about the benefits of migration to combat hatred and xenophobia against asylum seekers, refugees and migrants in general.

- **Common European asylum:** There is a need to develop a real common European legal asylum framework system which is mandatory, according to international law, safe and effective, and ensures that all Member States respect international human rights law. Public services dealing with asylum seekers, particularly in the EU border Member States, should be sufficiently staffed and trained, and their accountability mechanisms should also be improved and human-rights based. The framework must address the arbitrary handling of asylum criteria, illegal detention at borders and forced return, even to states where the refugees are at risk of serious harm or persecution. The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum does not sufficiently guarantee the fundamental rights of people at our borders, it does not prioritise combatting mafias profiting from migration, it does not rule out detaining children, and it trivialises the notion of 'safe third country' without

accounting for the reality in these places.

- **Return Regulation:** The 'return hubs' in third countries, as agreed by EU legislators in June 2026, are deeply concerning and the Workers' Group opposes them, because the possibility of fundamental rights violation increases exponentially in those places, as evidence shows, particularly with lax consideration of what constitutes a 'safe third country'.

- **Humane migration:** The Conference on the Future of Europe (including the EU Blue Card), stressed the need to fight human trafficking, improve access to the labour market for migrants, work in countries of origin to tackle the roots of migration, deploy measures to ensure the security of migrants, review the Dublin Agreements on Asylum and first countries, and generally approach migration and asylum from a humane perspective. It is necessary to implement effective search and rescue systems in European seas, with cooperation mechanisms between Member States to manage rescues operated by private vessels; put forward targeted measures to fully reflect the gender dimension of migration and the vulnerable position of unaccompanied minors and children; and tackle climate change-induced migration.

- **Real, safe and effective pathways** for labour migration have to be established and must guarantee decent labour conditions for migrants, including cooperation with transit and origin countries. On this point, the Quality Jobs Roadmap is an opportunity to include migrants as a target group to improve labour conditions and possibilities for effective complaints. Migration can be a powerful aid against demographic decline, skill mismatches in the labour market, and as a driver for growth, productivity and innovation. The Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration is a useful framework for exploring international migration governance mechanisms involving the countries of origin, transit and destination and emphasising the respect of human rights and decent work. This is notwithstanding that people in countries ravaged by war, economic crisis, corruption,

military and civil violence and other causes might still be forced to flee and travel by any means available.

- **Integration** must be seen as an asset to society. Integration must be understood as a bidirectional process that affects and involves both the host society and the group arriving, with decent work as the main factor for integration and equal rights as a mechanism for incorporation. Proper integration policies are needed, with good practice exchange between local actors, as integration takes place at the local level – collaboration of the EESC with partners in the framework of the European Partnership for Integration. Employment and labour market integration aimed at the long-term needs of migrant communities are key to successful inclusion, as is the involvement of social partners in the process, including as a barrier against migrant exploitation. These principles also mean that it is necessary to minimise the obstacles that too often prevent immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers from accessing housing, education, health and social inclusion, and thus contributing to economic, social, political and cultural life and the building of inclusive societies where they can participate fully and freely.

- **Combat migrant exploitation:** The worst practices must be sanctioned. Member States and their specialised bodies must confront the cases of abuse and exploitation. This includes, for example, unfair hiring practices.

- **The professional qualifications and skills of migrant workers** must be recognised within and throughout the EU and the mobility of pension schemes and retirement benefits for third-country nationals needs to be improved. At the same time, circular migration and family reunification should be encouraged.

- **Immigration and society:** Shift the narrative by disseminating unbiased information to the public, highlighting the normality of migration within the EU, as well as the positive economic, labour market, demographic and cultural benefits it brings and promoting actions to increase social inter-

actions between the native population and immigrants.

- **Push for major public information campaigns** based on empirical evidence to explain the critical prerequisite for in-

ward migration and to challenge the prevalence of misconceptions that can lead to xenophobia and hatred for migrants and asylum seekers.



RULE OF LAW AND FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

Democracy rests not just on the will of the majority, but also on respect for minorities and for political differences, and on the fact that everyone is subject to the rule of law and protected by fundamental rights. A virtuous triad is understood to consist of democracy, fundamental rights and the rule of law, none of which can exist without the other two.

This is increasingly contested by far-right movements, which challenge the universality of human rights, respect for pluralism, the separation of powers in the state, gender equality and rights and the independence of journalists, civil society and social partners, to name a few issues.

The protection of fundamental rights and the rule of law is a cornerstone of the EU project and of democracy at large, as they are the basis for a functioning democratic and pluralistic society. One of the main threats is disinformation, on which far-right parties thrive, spreading rumours and fake news at a rate that cannot be effectively countered, while profiting electorally from it and gradually delegitimising the democratic institutions that they wish to dismantle and criminalising civil society stakeholders.

Additionally, there is a renewed need to defend the fundamental rights of workers and trade unions across Europe: The ETUC and ITUC warn that respect for trade union rights has reached its worst level in the past decade, with a growing number of countries systematically violating the right to form and join a trade union, as well as restrict-

ing the rights to strike and to freedom of expression¹⁴. These trends are at risk of further deterioration by the rise of far-right political forces, which frequently promote anti-union and anti-strike agendas.

It is necessary to analyse the rise of the far right and its political consolidation, but it is also essential that trade unions take proactive measures to counter these discourses and promote alternative narratives that debunk false populist rhetoric. In this regard, it is essential to forge partnerships with civil society organisations, which are also victims of the far-right.

Therefore, we need to update our messaging and make more effective use of social media to put forward our own narrative – one that is not merely reactive but proactive: it is important not only to be right, but also to know how to explain it.

In this context, it is important to address

¹⁴ <https://www.etuc.org/en/pressrelease/workers-rights-europe-worst-level-decade-signals-need-policy-overhaul>;

<https://www.ituc-csi.org/global-rights-index>.

emotional factors in order to mobilise class consciousness as a factor in our collective identity.

The fight against discrimination, present and future (anticipating new challenges posed by changes such as the development of AI), is fundamental. The building of human rights can only stand if the rights of every single person are respected.

KEY PROPOSALS:

- **Promote democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights**, including social and economic rights, and support organised civil society in its fight against discrimination and misinformation.
- **Ensure a working civil and legal framework** for the independence of civil society, for free and independent trade unions.
- **Analyse, expose and confront the misinformation** behind the far-right narratives, particularly when they claim to protect workers and defend democratic interests.
- **Monitor social rights**, including the right to strike and to collective bargaining, and push for their application and compliance throughout the EU. Extend these demands via public procurement conditionality and as clauses in trade agreements and due diligence mechanisms.
- **Combat populism and extremism**, focusing especially on the fight against gender-based violence and racism.
- **Advocate the introduction of cross-cutting primary education programmes** that include better civic education, a better understanding of human rights and the duty to remember, as well as the role and values of trade unions.

GLOBAL AGENDA BASED ON PEACE, SOLIDARITY, EQUALITY AND INCLUSION

The polycrises seen in recent years have provided a mixed image of Europe. While the reaction to the pandemic, despite its first slow steps, was largely a common effort (for issues like buying doses of the vaccines) and the EU has kept a unified front in Ukraine, new wars and conflicts have again completely divided the EU's external policy.

This serves as a clear warning that there are limited instances in which the EU is able to speak with a single voice on the international stage. However, enough tools must be devised so that, when possible, this unified voice can carry weight. The retreat of democracy both in the EU and its neighbourhood is still occurring, now with war at the gates of the EU, and with the largest crisis in the Middle East in decades.

Living conditions around the EU are worsening, and the scarcity of wheat and other agricultural outputs with the Russian invasion of Ukraine threatens to cause substantial price hikes for European consumers and risks of starvation in poorer countries. These can further destabilise a neighbourhood ridden with geopolitical conflicts, civil strife, and often political autocracy and religious extremism.

In this delicate context, we need a compass capable of outlining the right behaviours to address the main challenges that risk dividing the workers' movement, increasing the suffering of workers or at the very least reducing their levels of well-being. This compass is represented by:

- Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, which outlines the founding values of the EU
- Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union, which highlights what we could define as European public goods
- The United Nations Charter
- The UN Sustainable Development Goals
- The EU Charter of Fundamental Rights
- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- The ILO Fundamental Conventions

We need a major European mobilisation to revive the European project founded on these values and the pursuit of these European public goods. For these reasons, activities across the various fields should be primarily directed towards achieving these objectives.

International trade cannot and must not be an end in itself, completely cut off from EU values. International trade must be conducted within a shared framework of values that the EU must respect and enforce.

We need fair trade agreements that will help in the creation of decent jobs and the

protection of fundamental human rights, including workers' and trade union rights. In this context, it is essential to ensure full compliance with ILO labour standards and core conventions.

Such a framework should include the preservation of the environment and biodiversity and conformity with the Paris Agreement on climate change, safeguard high-quality public services and strengthen Europe's industrial basis. We must respond to the current wave of growing protectionism with fair trade, with upward social conditions not just within the EU, to ensure that interdependence does not mean an inherent weakness. At the same time, we should seize the opportunity posed by the challenges of the energy market to create a functioning electricity market that protects consumers, fosters renewable energy and provides affordable prices.

KEY PROPOSALS

- **We must defend a global agenda driven by a multilateral approach** and reformed multilateral institutions, rather than protectionism and unilateralism. Multilateralism and its reference institutions (United Nations, International Monetary Fund, World Bank, World Trade Organization, International Labour Organization etc.) must be able to ensure global public goods: peace, health security, fighting climate change, combatting poverty, financial stability, fair trade, etc. We call for the existing multilateral bodies to undergo a necessary reform capable of ensuring real geographical representation for areas that have been neglected for too long (Africa and Latin America) and for overcoming the impasse of unanimity voting in the UN Security Council. We reject the idea of creating a business committee called the 'Board of Peace' that could replace the role of the United Nations.
- **We must keep supporting the cause of peace in Ukraine:** The EU must assume a fundamental role in the peace negotiations, equal to the United States. We reaffirm

that a nation's borders cannot be altered through a deliberate act of military aggression, and that, therefore, Russia must withdraw its invading forces. We must likewise support the resilience of Ukraine's institutions and the consolidation of its democratic system, including strong social rights and respect for minorities.

- **The EU's commitment to peace and the peaceful resolution of conflicts** includes the adherence to non-proliferation principles and treaties. Reducing and ultimately eliminating nuclear weapons must remain a collective objective and effort at a global scale.
- **The EU's absolute priority in the Mediterranean region and the Middle East must be to undertake**, using all diplomatic means at its disposal, to bring about a genuine cessation of hostilities and seek a just peace under the auspices of the United Nations. It must also demand respect for human rights and international humanitarian law from all states and political actors involved. The EU must support the implementation of a two-state solution, as this is the only way for Palestinians and Israelis to live together in peace.
- **Stability, democratic development and upward social convergence** in the Western Balkans are of strategic importance for the future of Europe. A credible enlargement process must strengthen social cohesion, reduce inequalities and improve the quality of life in the region in order to reinforce trust in the European project. The enlargement process in the Western Balkans must prevent social dumping and brain drain by promoting upward social convergence, fair wages, strong public services, collective bargaining and sustainable economic development.
- **The neighbourhood policy must be strengthened** by supporting sovereignty and reforms, providing assistance to candidate countries to address resilience challenges and finding solutions to ongoing conflicts, such as the one in Ukraine, with a strong diplomatic role for the EU at the negotiation table.
- **Promote a financing plan to support**

the provision of European public goods

based on a system of taxes: on the income of large web communications, information technology and social media companies, on financial transactions and on digital currency transactions

- **In view of the impulse gained by the new wave of enlargement,** it is more urgent than ever to highlight the need for a Treaty reform, to transform the decision-making structures of the EU, preventing the current deadlocks, which would only increase with more Member States. This should provide for a more objective and transparent accession mechanism and give the EU back its main tool for foreign policy in its neighbourhood.

- **As enlargement countries face a series of challenges across the board** – from the rule of law, including judicial independence, the fight against corruption and organised crime, and media freedom to economic development, environmental protection and social cohesion – civil society organisations, and in particular trade unions, can make a significant contribution to addressing these challenges. We need to work together with the social partners in candidate countries to foster transparent, accountable and competent civil society organisations, which are essential partners in achieving long-term societal change leading to full EU membership. EU support for civil society in those countries must continue.

- **Progress in the enlargement process should be measured** not only through institutional and economic indicators, but also through tangible improvements in the quality of life of workers and citizens, including access to quality public services, decent work, social protection and democratic participation.

- **During the enlargement process, the EU must make sure that before joining,** candidate countries fulfil all required social standards, are stable democracies and respect the rule of law, human rights and minorities. They must also ratify and genuinely implement the ILO core conventions, especially those on freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining and the

right to equal pay.

- **The EU's Global Gateway could become a strategic investment capable of strengthening real cooperation** with partner countries by ensuring compliance with high environmental, social and governance standards, provided that respect for human rights and workers' rights, as well as the effective and efficient involvement of the population, social partners and local civil society are ensured. For this reason, we insist on strong social conditionality for all Global Gateway projects, including binding respect for collective bargaining coverage and trade union freedom. Furthermore, full transparency should be demanded throughout the project cycle, and we must ensure meaningful civil society co-decision-making in the governance and oversight of the initiative.

TRADE – CHALLENGES OF FUTURE TRADE AGREEMENTS

- Public services must be protected from liberalisation in any trade deal. There is no support for further privatisation of public services through such agreements.
- Worker-centred EU trade agreements should be negotiated and monitored through transparent, democratic and inclusive processes.
- EU trade agreements must include enforceable labour provisions ensuring effective monitoring with sanctions for labour rights violations in the form of a strong corporate sustainability directive, based on due diligence.
- Bilateral trade agreements are a sub-optimal solution that can be accepted only in a temporary situation of crisis of trade multilateralism. A rule-based multilateral order must be re-established, and a multilateral solution must be found within the context of a reformed WTO. A reformed WTO should promote sustainable development, social justice and decent work. This means respecting labour standards as set and monitored by the ILO. These standards must be included as part of WTO considerations and in future multilateral agreements.

- A UN Treaty on Business and Human Rights and the establishment of an ILO Convention on decent work in global supply chains are needed.

DOMESTIC ADVISORY GROUPS (DAGS):

- The negotiation and monitoring of EU trade agreements should be conducted through a transparent, democratic and inclusive process. We will aim for:
- Strengthening the implementation, effectiveness and efficacy of the DAGs. They must ensure strong representation and the independence of the CSOs and social partners on both sides. In this view, trade policy must prioritise the interests of workers and promote a green and digital transition. A just transition will only be possible if trade policy is accompanied by an agenda of upskilling, reskilling and social dialogue, and this should be implemented by both partners interested in the trade agreements; Common priorities for greater consistency across the DAGs; Ensuring the effective involvement of local civil society organisations in third countries; Better co-operation between the ETUC, ITUC and the EESC, as well as improving internal organisation and communication within the DAGs.

EU-UK RELATIONS

- Acknowledging that the UK is the most important partner of the EU outside its borders, despite the regrettable circumstance of the UK's choice to leave the EU. This is especially true in light of all respected opinion polls that have been reflecting for some time that a majority of the people of the UK regret this decision. Therefore, it is important to foster the closest possible economic, cultural and political relationship with the UK, including cooperation with organised civil society in the UK, in the hope of a future return of the UK to the EU, if the conditions allow.
- Enforcement of the non-regression clause to the whole EU social acquis and any other EU law provision affecting work-

ing conditions.

- Requirement for the UK to keep pace with future improvements in EU social and employment standards. This can be done through the efficient implementation of Trade and Cooperation Agreement provisions on the level playing field to prevent the UK from falling behind future improvements in EU social and employment standards.
- Application of the place of work principle. The same pay for the same work in the same place must be guaranteed.
- The UK should guarantee that no existing rights will be changed or watered down, now or in the future.
- A level playing field is needed, particularly in the areas of social standards and protection of workers' rights, as well as in environmental protection principles.
- Financial support in the fisheries and associated industries should be guaranteed to ensure the preservation of jobs or opportunities for alternative employment.
- Peace in Northern Ireland must be protected and disruptions that would undermine the Good Friday Agreement must be prevented.
- While careful to avoid any interference in the UK's sovereign decision-making, we are committed to continuing to work towards maximum cooperation between the EU and the UK and to enhancing links across the entire civil society spectrum.

EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

- Establish dialogue with civil society in Belarus and provide support and cooperation in the process of democratisation by proposing the establishment of an EU-Belarus monitoring committee.
- Support Ukraine in its efforts to achieve peace, ensuring its steady integration into the EU together with the rest of the candidate countries. The collective determination of the Ukrainian people to defend themselves and to keep their country alive while under attack constitutes a remarkable act of civic resistance. It calls for concrete solidarity that reflects this commitment

and dignity. As accession talks with the European Union are underway, we strongly affirm that the fundamental rights of workers must be a cornerstone of the future of Ukraine and Europe. They cannot be relegated to the background in the name of the urgency of the war or the imperatives of reconstruction. On the contrary, respect for freedom of association, collective bargaining, the right to strike, social security and safe working conditions is the best bulwark against exploitation, inequality and arbitrary rule. A truly democratic reconstruction can only be achieved by fully involving trade unions and making workers' rights a pillar of lasting peace.

- Encourage proper funding for the creation and effective operation of the Economic and Social Committee in the Republic of Moldova, in line with the National Trade Union Confederation of Moldova's formal request.
- Support the pacification process in the Southern Caucasus (Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia) with the involvement of Turkish civil society as an important actor in the area. The pacification process should provide an important opportunity for the microregion's economic and social development through the implementation of transport, energy and trade networks. In this context, it is essential to support and give technical assistance to civil society and independent unions of the Southern Caucasus area.

EU-RUSSIA RELATIONS

- Provide support for free civil society and independent trade unions in Russia.
- Provide support for the rule of law and the protection of human rights.
- Revise and upgrade existing sanctions to prevent Russia from circumventing them and reduce dependency on Russian resources as much as possible.
- Develop monitoring tools to tackle active misinformation campaigns, cyber-warfare and other forms of aggression from Russia against EU Member States.
- Establish a special international tribunal

on crimes of aggression against Ukraine.

- Develop an EU legal framework for designating states as sponsors of terrorism and states that use terrorist methods.
- Break off cooperation with Russian companies and organisations that support Putin's policies.

CENTRAL ASIA

- Recognise the growing strategic importance of Central Asia for the EU, in the context of geopolitical shifts, trade corridors, energy security and supply chains.
- Similarly to the EU's approach to the Southern Caucasus, applying comparable levels of political engagement and conditionality on social standards in close partnership with local civil society and independent trade unions is critical. EU engagement must explicitly be anchored in the Joint Declaration of the first EU-Central Asia Summit (4 April 2025), which reaffirms commitments to workers' rights and freedom of association.

AFRICA

- Strengthen ties with African CSOs, trade unions, the African Economic and Social Committees (the AU ECOSOCC and the Economic and Social Committee for French-speaking countries, headquartered in Abidjan) by providing support and technical assistance.
- Implement an informal or formal joint monitoring system to investigate the implementation of these standards regarding the full respect for the rule of law and social and environmental sustainability (social and environmental standards) in EU Global Gateway projects and in projects that involve EU enterprises on critical raw materials in Africa.
- Promote long-term investment in intra-African infrastructure to foster regional value chains (in particular on critical raw materials) and a sustainable local economy that makes economic sense.
- Support the agricultural and food industries in Africa to promote food security

in the region and end famine by helping improve cultivation, reduce harvest losses and enhance quality standards.

- Support African countries in tax policy, migration, development, the environment, education, health, and working and living conditions.
- Support empowerment of women in Africa.
- Promote a process of peace in every part of Africa by neutralising, by all possible means, the influence that other states are exerting in promoting and/or fuelling these wars. Advocate ending the war and famine in Sudan by influencing external actors that are driving the conflict.

MERCOSUR

- The increased pressure exerted by the current geopolitical environment has proven to be problematic for Europe. Increased trade and cooperation with Mercosur Member States could provide the European Union with opportunities to strengthen international bonds and benefit the industry.
- However, there is a need for a proper framework and mechanisms in the trade agreement to enforce environmental and labour standards, as the current agreement does not even provide basic sanctioning of companies that violate the rights of their workers or destroy a region's natural habitat¹⁵. Such labour and environmental safeguard mechanisms are essential to tackle social dumping, while defending the well-being of workers in Europe and South America and protecting the Amazon rainforest.
- The role of the DAGs will be crucial to ensure full compliance with the economic, social and environmental standards established in the agreement, provided that: i) effective participation by local civil society is guaranteed; ii) the necessary tools are put in place to ensure that reporting economic, social and environmental violations leads to the effective implementation of corrective measures to counteract such bad

practices.

- We express concerns about the overall working conditions in Mercosur countries and the potential impact of the EU-Mercosur Agreement, as well as the lack of transparency and the opacity with which the negotiations are being conducted, particularly in the Mercosur countries.
- It is necessary to ratify various basic ILO conventions in the region, in particular: fundamental conventions that cover universal basic labour rights, such as freedom of association, collective bargaining and abolition of forced or child labour, governance conventions addressing labour inspections and employment policy, and technical conventions that deal with aspects of working conditions, labour protections, wages and social security.
- Additionally, workers negatively impacted by such a trade agreement should be fully covered by flanking measures, such as the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund and ESF+. This underlines the need for a comprehensive understanding of the employment and social impact of such a trade agreement, so that the appropriate corrective measures can be implemented.

EU-CHINA RELATIONS

- While we highlight and deplore the shortcomings of the People's Republic of China regarding the respect for human rights, workers' rights and freedom of association in the workplace and the application of democratic principles, we believe it is nevertheless appropriate to promote an open, frank and transparent dialogue with the various Chinese actors. We should also prioritise relations with CSOs that are independent of the regime.
- Through existing negotiation tools, we can pursue an overall improvement of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (ratifying the ILO conventions, addressing the lack of a human rights clause in the agreement and protecting minorities, etc.).
- There is a need to reflect on the influ-

¹⁵ <https://www.etuc.org/en/pressrelease/abuse-workers-would-go-unpunished-under-mercosur-deal>.

ence of China in Africa and Latin America.

EU-US RELATIONS

- As aligned with the ETUC position, we recognise that stable transatlantic trade relations are geopolitically important. However, it is also essential for the EU to regain a level of strategic autonomy and independence that allows it to engage on the international scene with greater confidence and security¹⁶.
- The EU-US Framework Agreement, as currently drafted, lacks fairness, balance and reciprocity. This agreement, as it stands, undermines European workers, social standards and protections, and long-term investment priorities, favouring a European politico-economic model that accommodates Trump's vision.
- Withdrawal or reversal of the tariff concessions is recommended, with particular focus on deterring economic blackmail and threats.
- The imbalance and lack of strategic foresight weaken the EU's credibility as a defender of its socio-economic model and the rules-based system. Therefore, the EU should uphold a strong and principled position regarding the trade agreement with the USA.

MIDDLE EAST

- Dialogue, respect for human rights and the full implementation of international law are the only ways to achieve lasting peace in the region.
- Civil society organisations play a crucial role in promoting peace and rebuilding social cohesion.
- We need to engage and encourage the international community, including the EU, to step up diplomatic efforts in support of inclusive peacebuilding initiatives.
- We stand ready to assist in efforts aimed at restoring peace and ensuring that human rights and international law are up-

held across the region.

- We reiterate our commitment to the two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, based on the 1967 borders and in accordance with UN resolutions, and commit to do everything we possibly can to assist in its realisation.

DEFENCE, SECURITY AND PEACE

- Defend human rights and the importance of multilateral dialogue and peaceful settlements for conflicts arising or entrenched in time, and in which there is neither a unified EU position nor always an evident and viable solution in sight, with full implementation of UN regulations and respect for international law.
- Use the UN resolutions as a guideline and make use of the different tools the EU has with the single market and development aid to both incentivise and deter certain actions in these territories, in line with fundamental human rights, respect for decent working conditions, and democratic freedoms.
- Economic growth, competitiveness and security policies cannot be objectives in themselves if they are not translated into better living and working conditions, stronger social cohesion and improved quality of life for workers and their families.
- Express our concern at the danger of the growing drift towards militarism in Europe, which brings with it the danger of the 'law of unintended consequences'. We call for political coordination within the EU in the context of a common foreign policy based on EU values. There is a need for a legal provision in the Treaties to cater for the new reality of a militarised Europe, which could see fascists in charge of nuclear arsenals in the UK and France, despite the fact that the entire European project was constructed with the objective of ensuring that nothing like that would ever happen again.
- Insist that any action taken or statement made by the EU regarding international conflicts should keep the aim of peacebuilding in mind and that the EU, at its heart, is a peace project. A shifting political focus towards defence and deterrence should not come at the expense of invest-

¹⁶ <https://www.etuc.org/en/document/position-eu-us-framework-agreement>.

ments that address social and environmental challenges, or of the protection of workers and their rights in Europe and beyond.

- Advocate the creation of a peace strategy that acknowledges the need for defending both the EU's borders and the values that it was built upon, and interprets secu-

urity not exclusively in military terms but in terms of investing in public services, reinforcing welfare, reducing inequality and fortifying citizen trust in democratic processes and institutions. Social cohesion is a precondition for long-term security in Europe.



BETTER POLICY-MAKING AND STRATEGIC FORESIGHT

The Workers' Group believes that the EU better regulation system should focus on the quality of EU legislation and on how far it achieves its aim.

Despite having developed a comprehensive EU better regulation system, involving consultation, impact assessments, evaluation, inter-institutional commitment and independent oversight, there are many weaknesses in its application. For instance, the European Commission does not provide evidence that burden-reduction programmes have had the desired effects. It provides the total figures for the expected savings resulting from each of the proposed omnibus packages, but it remains silent on the calculation methods and the underlying evidence. Also, none of the omnibus packages put forward by the Commission have been accompanied by an impact assessment even if there is a dedicated simplification website¹⁷.

This disregard for the better regulation rules led to complaints to the European Ombudsman (2025)¹⁸, which has admonished the Commission for using the derogation from better regulation requirements, and stressed that minimum standards of

transparency, evidence-based analysis and inclusiveness must never be compromised. The 2026 European Commission's new vision for EU law-making, set out in its Communication *A simpler, clearer and better enforced EU rulebook*¹⁹, is normalising these trends, including by putting a stronger focus on limiting 'gold-plating', which risks curtailing workers' ability to push for more ambitious legislative solutions at a national level, thereby undermining the social and economic foundations on which sustainable growth depends.

Strategic foresight is integrated in the EU's better regulation agenda. It is a future-oriented discipline that seeks to understand, anticipate and address emerging challenges and opportunities through systematic and structured identification and analysis of long-term trends, drivers of change and potential disruptive developments that may shape the political, economic, social and technological landscape. It is not about predicting the future; it is about exploring different possible futures that could

¹⁷ https://commission.europa.eu/law/law-making-process/better-regulation/simplification-and-implementation/simplification_en.

¹⁸ European Ombudsman annual report for 2025.

¹⁹ https://commission.europa.eu/law/law-making-process/better-regulation/simplification-implementation-enforcement/simpler-clearer-and-better-enforced-eu-rulebook_en.

arise, in order to better prepare for change and ensure that legislation and political decisions are made taking into account its long-term consequences and possible ramifications, for instance providing early warning on creating path dependencies or infrastructural lock-ins.

Along these lines, the Workers' Group at the EESC is strengthening its members' foresight capabilities with the aim to further integrate foresight and systemic thinking into the EU policy cycle.

Our members and our network of trade union organisations are indeed best placed to sense the weak signals and underlying trends that announce and drive the future.

We have developed some foresight activities along three main lines:

- **Raising awareness and building capacity among members** and staff through training, organising debates and hearings with a foresight focus, providing information on foresight events and activities;
- **Strengthening cooperation with other EU institutions** thanks to strong cooperation with the European Commission, including its Joint Research Centre, and the European Parliament, notably the European Parliament Research Service, and with the European Committee of the Regions;
- **Adopting opinions²⁰ and carrying out studies²¹ with a forward-looking approach** and, in some cases, with a foresight methodology to enhance their potential impact on the political discussion.

²⁰ *A Blueprint for a European Green and Social Deal, based on a wellbeing economy (NAT/927); Towards a just transition legislative proposal and EU policy tools that enable a more social European Green Deal (NAT/933)* (at the initiative of the Workers' Group);

Pro-worker AI: levers for harnessing the potential and mitigating the risks of AI in connection with employment and labour market policies (SOC/803) (at the initiative of the Workers' Group and integrating a request for an exploratory opinion from the Polish Presidency).

²¹ *The European Economic and Social Committee in 2040 – Critical Variables and Four Scenarios; Socially just transition in the Green Deal: cost of inaction.*

KEY PROPOSALS

- **Develop a long-term vision of Europe's future** to sustain the strategic planning over time and to strategically set the stage for our 2025–2030 mandate. This will make it possible to develop a lasting and comprehensive progressive narrative founded on solid policy pathways.
- **Long-term vision components** are already built into the EU agenda or into the political debate, but they are mere components of an undefined collective future, lacking a comprehensive and coherent vision. Our group needs to address this shortcoming. For the Workers' Group, strategic action during this term should be joined up with a longer-term policy agenda built on a compelling vision for Europe's future by 2050.
- **Possible European futures** should also be part of the group's new strategic approach. A strategic political foresight project should explore possible European futures (by 2040/2050) and identify preferred or desirable futures within this range out of a collective and participatory set of discussions in dedicated workshops and interactions with and among group members and external participants (academics, trade union leaders, MEPs, national parliamentarians, young people, etc.), ultimately leading to a comprehensive agenda developed through the back-casting of policy pathways into the future.
- **This would strengthen the group's long-term vision of a realistically desirable and achievable future.** The Workers' Group plays an increasing role in providing policy makers with advice and expertise and in supporting the implementation of EU policies, and hence in the end provides tangible benefits to EU workers and citizens. However, we need to maximise the group's visibility on the strategic priorities and on the flagship battles via a sustained communication effort that may include effective strategic political campaigning. The group's strategic plan also seeks to define the terms of the political and public debate regarding joint action/alliances.





