NEWSLETTER
WORKERS’ GROUP
MARCH 2019

342nd PLENARY SESSION

- Debate on the European Citizen Initiative ‘Stop Extremism’.
- Debate with the French ESC
- Debate on sustainable Europe
- Oliver Röpke, new Workers’ Group President

- Fake news and Disinformation
- Sustainable Europe
- Education and Vocational Training
- Endocrine Disruptors
- Harmonised Standards
- EU Education
The social and environmental dimensions of the future of Europe are intertwined, and so is the need for increased funding to implement the social pillar, realise the UN 2030 Agenda and respect the Paris Agreement. The positive impact of European integration has not spread evenly and has not benefitted all citizens equally.

“quality jobs, education, minimum income and wages for a sustainable future”

The Workers’ Group calls for investments in quality jobs and education, and convergence of minimum incomes and minimum wages in all member states.

To create a sustainable future for all European citizens, it is important to acknowledge their legitimate concerns and encourage their participation in political decision-making processes. This requires structured and permanent civil and social dialogue.

Combating misinformation requires active participation from civil society and the EESC has been pro-actively supporting this. There are fears that the Action Plan against disinformation might not make an impact in time before the 2019 EP elections, but we stress that it will be crucial to protect European democracies in future as well.

The Workers’ Group urges the Commission to widen its focus to also include internal actors and external countries besides Russia. For the long term, fostering media-literacy will be essential to build citizens’ resilience against disinformation.
FAKE NEWS

“fake news fuel hatred, distrust. The Action Plan is needed to protect democracy”

Overall, the Workers’ Group welcomes the joint efforts against disinformation, but notes that other forms of ‘fake news’, such as highly selective information, defamation, scare mongering and inciting hatred, also jeopardise citizens’ and minority rights.

EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING IN THE EURO-MEDITERRANEAN REGION

CINZIA DEL RIO

Education and Vocational Training (EVT) can play a major role in tackling youth unemployment and under-employment, which stand well above the EU average. In that very region, there is a strong need for technically skilled workers. EVT is an effective way to combat this mismatch of skills between supply and demand on the labour market.

“EVT can be fundamental to tackle youth unemployment”

Unfortunately, a negative image of EVT persists in all countries because of a lack of quality investments. EVT systems should be accessible to all, including women and youth in rural areas, and provide people with a solid foundation of shared values and knowledge. In addition, vocational training should be linked to apprenticeships and prepare citizens for a future of lifelong learning.

EDUCATION ABOUT THE EUROPEAN UNION: ITS FUNCTIONING, POSITIVE ACHIEVEMENTS AND CONCRETE BENEFITS FOR CITIZENS

TATJANA BABRAUSKIENĖ

Currently, only 56% of Europeans report that they feel attached to the EU. Education will create a better understanding of the EU, highlight its effects on citizen’s everyday lives and encourage active participation in decision-making.
“EVT can be fundamental to tackle youth unemployment”

Formal education in schools must be combined with non-formal education through civil society organisations and the media. The 9th of May, Europe Day, can serve as a starting point for planning school activities about the EU on the national and local level.

The Workers’ group calls for lifelong education on the history, values and achievements of the European Union to enable workers and citizens in general to take part in the political process.

Harmonised standards are a key part of EU law and essential for completing the Single Market. In the light of rapid technological developments and digitalisation, the process of adopting harmonised standards needs to be faster, more efficient and flexible.

Harmonised Standards: Enhancing Transparency and Legal Certainty for a Fully Functioning Single Market

Gerardo Larghi

By ensuring sufficient funding, the Commission needs to ensure that the development of standards is inclusive. Currently, many stakeholders do not participate, which leads to difficulties in defending EU standards internationally. The EESC has offered to host an annual multi-stakeholder forum to facilitate the exchange of good practices between different sectors.

Towards a More Comprehensive EU Framework on Endocrine Disruptors

Brian Curtis

Endocrine Disruptors are substances that can affect the health of humans and animals, causing malformations, growth issues, neurological disorders and cancer, among others.

Humans can be exposed through food, dust or water, by inhalation or skin contact. Not having a ‘safe threshold’ like
other substances, the Workers’ Group supports the Commission’s attempt to have a coherent framework on them, enhancing communication among supply chain points and harmonising the treatment of substances, instead of having many legislation for each depending on its use.

“exposure to EDs can cause malformations, neurological disorders, and cancer, and there might be no safe threshold”

Together with this, we urge the Commission to go further, devoting funds for early identification of EDs, finding safe alternatives, and developing environmental protocols due to the persistence of these substances in the environment.
The plenary approved by an overwhelming majority an opinion conveying clear messages to the European institutions about the urgent need to forge a sustainable future for Europe together with the citizens and civil society. For the Workers’ Group members, the main message is that there can be no sustainable future without a strong social Europe.

PETER SCHMIDT, rapporteur of the opinion and President of the Sustainable Development Observatory, called for Europe to take the lead in sustainability globally by adopting an ambitious approach to social and environmental issues to directly address citizens’ main concerns, i.e. rising inequalities and climate change.

“Without social sustainability there will be no sustainable future”

Peter Schmidt

ANNE DEMELENNE, former General Secretary and president of the Wallonia section of the FGTB, stressed that redefining the future was crucial to restore citizens’ confidence in the EU who felt that it had not done enough for their well-being and feared the spectre of a new crisis and an environmental catastrophe. She added that the EU should set an example that would go beyond European borders.

“We have failed to eradicate poverty while wealth grows. Inequality grows, and social protection wildly varies across the EU”

Anne Demelenne
OLIVER RÖPKE, President of the Workers’ Group, called for a new social deal that offers all citizens a fairer society including by creating quality jobs, fighting tax evasion and defending youth and women’s rights. He insisted on the need to transpose the UN Agenda 2030 goals at all levels and on a Europe that stands in solidarity with migrants.

“Inequality, divergence, division, this is not the Europe that we want”

Oliver Röpke

Citizens’ Initiative ‘Stop extremism’. They announced that the initiative had collected 1.6 million signatures that are currently being verified. They explained that the initiative aims to fight extremism in all its forms, including hate speech on- and offline.

Michael Laubsch warned that the influence from actors outside the EU is growing and that terrorist attacks have become more common in Europe.

Sebastian Reimer called for a clear definition of extremism, one that includes all those who attack human rights. With this citizens’ initiative, they call for a joint strategy against extremism and penalties for those financing it.

OLIVERRÖPKE, Workers’ Group President, thanked the organisers of the citizens’ initiative for starting this discussion. He stressed that it is not enough to counter extremism but that we need to prevent it, for example by combating socioeconomic exclusion. He also warned that anti-extremism measures must never result in censorship or self-cen-
The response to the threat of extremism and terrorism should not itself intrude upon the very values we defend - those of freedom, democracy, justice and the rule of law’, he said.

“The response to extremism must not intrude upon the very values we defend - those of freedom, democracy, justice, and rule of law”

Oliver Röpke

“Europeans: Look beyond your borders, don’t shut yourselves in. Populism and extremism are gaining ground”

Cinzia del Rio

Cinzia del Rio, Workers’ Group Member, reminded participants in the debate that it was international anti-racism day. She shared observations from her home country, Italy, where extremism and populism are on the rise. She also called on Europeans to look beyond their borders and not shut themselves in. Finally, she praised this initiative as an important starting point in a bid to stand up for a Europe where people live in a spirit of harmony, bringing together the progressive forces such as trade unions and civil society.

“Europeans: Look beyond your borders, don’t shut yourselves in. Populism and extremism are gaining ground”

Cinzia del Rio

French Economic and Social Committee

Debate with Patrick Bernasconi

Patrick Bernasconi, President of the French Economic and Social Committee, opened the debate highlighting the need for visibility of economic and social councils, the necessary role of participatory democracy and the social partners. He explained how lack of dialogue and anticipation...
debates broke social peace, despite early warning signs: the ‘gilets jaunes’ are not isolated; Spanish ‘indignados’ or Greek demonstrators are connected to it. A better balance between participation and representation will be fundamental for the survival of our democracies, he concluded.

**“The Gilets Jaunes are one of the many warning signs: we need a better balance between participation and representation”**

Patrick Bernasconi

**“We talk about public consultation, but real dialogue needs civil society.”**

Pierre Jean Coulon

**PIERRE JEAN COULON**, TEN section President, added that ‘it was high time for the social committees to be given actual worth, for the EESC to be more than a mere observer’, explaining that the role of the Committee should go beyond the drafting of opinions with uncertain effect. He reminded the room of the many excellent opinions done in the past and the fundamental importance of public debate and people’s engagement, for which the role of the Committee is essential. ‘We need tangible participation and representativeness or we can shut up and be swept away’, he concluded.

**ANNE DEMELENNE**, Workers’ Group member, asked why governments ignore systematically collective bargaining and advice from its actors. She insisted on the need for governments to listen and to integrate participatory democracy in their governance systems, or face the increasing loss of credibility they are experiencing.

**GEORGES DASSIS**, former EESC President, remarked that there won’t be a Europe without its citizens: real engage-
ment is fundamental, as are real dialogue and real participation.

‘There’s a lot of vagueness out there, if you realise’, he added, demanding concrete action in terms of participation, rather than empty words. He denounced the artificial separation of society and economy, the constant ignorance of social Europe. History, he concluded, should be more widely taught on how things used to be, so people do not take peace or free movement as given rights.

“Social and economic needs need to be part of the equation, if we want to avoid a ‘grand idea’ of Europe that is empty inside”

Georges Dassis

EUROPE HAS SAVED THE BANKS, NOW WE MUST SAVE ITS CITIZENS

Georges Dassis

Introducing an EU-guaranteed minimum income would send a clear message to Europeans that the Union really is there for them, writes Georges Dassis.

The days when almost all EU member state citizens backed European integration are long past. Today, integration could conceivably be put into reverse. Even though it is thanks to this same Union that we have lived in peace for the last seven decades.

It is hardly surprising. As Jacques Delors so succinctly put it, people “cannot fall in love with the single market”. When they are plunged into poverty, not only are they unconcerned about peace, but they are ready to follow anyone and believe anything.

That is why millions of citizens vote for political parties that directly or indirectly preach hate and call for borders to be closed as the solution to economic and social problems – although logically, the next step for these political forces would be to make war on their neighbours.

In spite of Brexit, it is still not too late to convince people that their future and their children’s future lies in a democratic, more united Europe that brings greater solidarity. To achieve this, we urgently need common policies, especially in the areas of external relations, defence, industry and technology, immigration and asylum, and education.

By far the most urgent need is to take the plight of those living in or threatened by poverty more seriously – despite the economic recovery underway in the last few years, the poverty rate remains at a worrying level in most EU member states. The figures are frightening: 22.5% of the EU population is at risk of poverty or exclusion; more than 6 million young people (aged between 15 and 24) are not in employment, education or training; 26 million children in Europe are living in poverty or exclusion. They form 27% of the EU’s population under 18.

In 2015, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker launched the investment plan for Europe that is named after...
him, and which has had a positive impact in practically all EU countries. We must certainly not underestimate the Juncker Commission’s initiatives in the social sphere, but it must be acknowledged that the poverty issue is far from being solved.

The open method of coordination (OCM), seen as the main tool for tackling poverty, has proved entirely inadequate. Let’s spare ourselves any more hypocrisy over subsidiarity: the European Commission cannot use it as a pretext for not proposing a binding European instrument to effectively combat poverty and the suffering it entails.

Aware of the seriousness of the situation, in February 2019 the European Economic and Social Committee adopted an opinion by a large majority, calling for the European Commission to draw up a framework directive to introduce a minimum income, guaranteed by the EU, for all citizens living on its territory. Introducing a directive of this kind would be fully in line with the “social triple-A for Europe”; as announced by President Juncker and would send a clear message to citizens that the Union really is there for them.

It would also make it possible to introduce minimum income systems in all the member states, to support them and ensure they are decent – in other words, sufficient. The directive would define a reference framework for the establishment of an adequate minimum income, tailored to the standard of living and way of life of each country and taking account of social redistribution, taxation and standard of living factors based on a reference budget whose methodology would be determined at European level.

Introducing a minimum income is a highly political issue, and the opinion adopted specifies in particular that:

• the right to work must continue to be a fundamental right, as a central element of empowerment and economic independence;
• a decent minimum income is essentially a temporary but indispensable approach whose objective is to integrate/reintegrate people into the labour market through active measures. It is a key measure for the credibility of the European Union;
• the adequacy and coverage of and access to minimum income remain major challenges for the member states when it comes to developing their schemes. These schemes should be supported and, where necessary, complemented at European level.

A united, integrated Europe is the only way we can continue living in peace. But unity will not survive with millions of citizens in, or under the threat of, poverty. The European Union has saved the banks. Now we must save its citizens, enabling them to live in dignity.

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**EUROPEAN ELECTIONS - 23 - 26 MAY 2019**

Ahead of the 2019 European elections, the European Parliament has undertaken several communication actions to make EU citizens aware of “What Europe does for them” in their everyday lives.

The EP campaign is centred around the “thistimeimvoting.eu” initiative, by which they are trying to get the grassroots (individuals) to persuade others – friends, family, colleagues, etc – to go out and vote: [https://www.thistimeimvoting.eu/](https://www.thistimeimvoting.eu/)

For your campaigning at national level, there is an interactive site which allows people to find out about the impact the EU has had in their region and in their lives [https://www.what-europe-does-for-me.eu](https://www.what-europe-does-for-me.eu)

The EP has also just launched a website explaining how to vote in every member state: [https://www.european-elections.eu/](https://www.european-elections.eu/)

Below is the link to the EESC’s webpage connecting with the European Parliament’s campaign: [https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/Focuson2019EUelections](https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/Focuson2019EUelections)

During their preparatory meeting ahead of the plenary, the members of the Workers’ Group bid farewell and best of luck to Gabriele Bischoff, former President of the Workers’ Group, wishing her success in her run for the European Parliament elections.

**OLIVER RÖPKE**, current Workers’ Group President, thanked her warmly for her dedication and commitment vowing that the battle for democracy and social rights in the EU would be fought together with Gabriele Bischoff, only now she will be fighting from the European Parliament. ‘Once a trade unionist, always a trade unionist’, he added.

**GOOD LUCK, GABY!**