Workers’ Group

NEWSLETTER

DECEMBER 2019 - JANUARY 2020

ADOPTED OPINIONS
PLENARY DEBATES
GROUP ACTIVITIES
Human rights are the foundation of Europe’s wealth and a peaceful, decent life. Their violation must not lead to unjustified profits and unfair competition. Even though a large majority of business feels committed to human rights, human rights violations in the context of business activities happen again and again. A binding treaty would guarantee worldwide uniform human rights standards as well as fair access to authorities and courts. This would allow also for a fairer global competition. A binding United Nations agreement could be an important first step towards corporate human rights due diligence.

External aid, investment and trade as instruments to reduce economic migration, with a special focus on Africa

Decent life based on a quality job, and not just eradication of extreme poverty, must be the goal of EU development policy. The success of the EU in creating opportunities for its people has made us a continent of net immigration. We should work together with African countries to offer them similar progress. This means that an equal partnership between the EU and African countries is absolutely necessary. One core aim of our development policy in Africa must be to improve the level of education there which is at the heart of improving living conditions. Therefore, EU development cooperation should focus on working towards a people-centred partnership, ensuring the participation of civil society, trade unions and the private sector to promote good governance, justice, democratisation and investments, and delivering direct benefits for African and European citizens.
All EU member states have an unemployment insurance scheme. However, the national systems differ largely with regard to the level of protection they guarantee. Member States must act to fulfil the EU’s commitment laid down in the European Pillar of Social Rights: Every unemployed person should receive support. This means that access to the scheme must be easier, and that it provides a sufficient entitlement period, a reasonable replacement rate and access to training and activation offers. A functioning security net in the case of unemployment does not only protect individuals from poverty, it also helps countries to stabilise demand in times of economic slowdown.

In order to achieve upward convergence, the opinion proposes a three-step approach: The European Commission should monitor the targets for unemployment benefits within the European Semester. In case of lacking progress, a Council recommendation could help. In a final step, a binding directive is necessary in order to reach up to the targets. There should also be a non-regression clause in order to prevent countries from lowering their standards.
The EU’s competition policy must create a social free market striking a balance between the achievement of social, environmental and economic objectives and maintaining an efficient and competitive productive structure. Our economy should protect workers and consumers and prepare for new challenges such as sustainable development, artificial intelligence, big data and many more. It is fundamental for the same social and environmental standards to be guaranteed where competition with companies from outside the EU is concerned, in order to ensure a level playing field.

The deterioration of the Baltic Sea ecosystem has been a well-known fact for years. Now, the Eastern Baltic cod stock is the only stock in European waters whose mortality from environmental factors is three times higher than fishing mortality. We welcome the urgently needed support to this sector by bringing all stakeholders together to ensure a coherent approach that gives priority to improving the ecosystem. Limitations to cod fishing must take due account of the sector’s skilled workers who would be left without a source of income and the need to implement retraining programmes to help their conversion.
The rapid progression of climate change raises serious doubts about the current European economic model. Therefore, the EU needs a radical change towards a new vision of prosperity for people and the planet. This opinion highlights four areas of action to achieve this: reframing enterprise, reforming work, restructuring investment and transforming the money system. Especially workers would gain from a transition towards the so-called “wellbeing economy”, because it is more labour-intensive, less productivity-oriented and hence more redistributive than the traditional economy.

The economy of wellbeing is a vision that fully embraces the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the economy’s environmental impact on ecosystems, biodiversity and climate. The text proposes a set of concrete measures to implement it, such as the adoption of a Green and Social Deal, re-distributive taxation and subsidies as well as new indicators of economic performance beyond the GDP.
The priorities of the Croatian Presidency of the EU, with Gordan Grlić Radman, Minister for Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia.

Mr Radman presented the priorities of Croatia’s EU presidency stating that Croatia chose “A strong Europe in the world of challenges” as the motto of its presidency to reflect the vision of an EU that acts in a united way for the benefit of all its Member States and citizens. Croatia’s policy towards the EU in the next six months consisted of four pillars: a Europe that develops, a Europe that protects, a Europe that connects and an influential Europe.

For the members of the Workers’ Group, the Croatian presidency should show determination and unity to give answers to the enormous challenges ahead such as the climate crisis, burning inequalities, Brexit, attacks against fundamental rights and the rule of law in some countries, etc.

Oliver Röpke, President of the Workers’ Group, stated that at this critical moment in its history, it was important for Europe to choose the right path. Citizens and workers needed ‘A Europe that protects’ above all in terms of their social and fundamental rights. Europe should ensure solidarity and guarantee the rule of law, it should protect its people against poverty, exclusion, discrimination. He called for a true action plan to implement the social pillar, to finally pave the way for a Social Europe.

Vilim Ribić spoke of the brain drain that plagued Croatia and other EU countries where economic depression had forced hundreds of thousands of high skilled workers to migrate to Western EU Member States. This caused inequalities to increase within the EU creating a fertile ground for populism and radicalisation which threatened its very foundations. He asked how Croatia was intending to raise awareness about these issues.
Olga Kikou, who works for ‘Compassion in World Farming’, an international organisation working on animal welfare, presented the European Citizens’ Initiative ‘End the Cage Age’. This ECI calls on the European Commission to ban all cages for EU farm animals. Ms Kikou explained that 170 organisations and 1.5 million EU citizens from all Member States had supported the claim to ban cage rearing in the EU for a number of animals so far, which showed how concerned EU citizens were about animal suffering and sentience.

Workers’ Group members Christophe Lefèvre and Piroska Kállay focused on the benefits of ECIs for democracy and the financial concerns with respect to free farming respectively.

As chair of the ad hoc ECI committee in the EESC, Christophe Lefèvre pointed out the importance of the European Citizens’ Initiative as a tool that can help improve standards in EU legislation and as a means to promote democracy in consultation processes so that voices of citizens are better heard.

Piroska Kállay, expressed concern about the price consequences of rolling back factory farming and called for an in-depth analysis of current and alternative production methods.
What can the EU do for the climate after the disappointing results of the UN Climate Change Conference COP25?

This was the focus of the plenary debate that gathered important personalities: Virginijus Sinkevičius, European Commissioner for the Environment, Oceans and Fisheries, Ovais Sarmaid, from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Enrico Giovannini, representing the Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development (ASviS) and Semia Cherif, scientist from the network of Mediterranean Experts on Climate and Environmental Change (MedECC).

Commissioner Sinkevičius described the European Green Deal as the EU’s commitment to stepping up efforts to reverse the negative trends in the environment, which was at a tipping point. The Green Deal was a new growth strategy with sustainability and social justice at its heart; it was setting the agenda for Europe to become a global leader in climate action, in line with the 2030 Agenda and the Paris Agreement and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

The general message that came out of all interventions was that it was essential to deal with the climate crisis very urgently and at an unprecedented level.

For the Workers’ Group members, the social dimension in the Green Deal was crucial and had to balance out all other aspects.
Peter Schmidt, President of the EESC’s Sustainable Development Observatory and rapporteur of the timely opinion on “The sustainable economy we want”, insisted that tackling the social question was crucial to ensure that the transition to a sustainable and carbon neutral economy left nobody behind. It was therefore important to have an overarching strategy that took into account all aspects – social, environmental and economic – so that citizens, workers and the economy would be certain that the EU knew exactly where it was going with this Green Deal in order to support it. As the representative body of European civil society, the EESC should play an important role in this framework.

Lucie Studničná, President of the EESC’s consultative commission dealing with industrial change, warned that the transition to a climate friendlier economy would affect regions differently: coal mining regions and regions that depended on heavy industry were particularly threatened. She called for a holistic approach that put people first to avoid the exacerbation of inequalities and a brain drain in those regions.

Dumitru Fornea stressed that to tackle the new environmental challenges the Green Deal should be the new Social Contract to help workers from the affected regions. The Just Transition had to be more than nice words; it needed enough funding for concrete measures.

Maria Nikolopoulou was concerned about whether global consumers and businesses were ready to change their attitudes to embrace sustainability. Were consumers ready to pay more for sustainable products? Were businesses ready to make less profit so that the environmental revolution was fair for all? These were important points that should also be taken into consideration.
The Committee organised a farewell ceremony for the EESC’s UK members, who were participating in their last plenary before Brexit, with the participation of several personalities, including Tom Jenkins, Former EESC president, and British activist Madeleine Kay.

Tom Jenkins pointed out that the UK trade unions were among the most pro-European organisations in Britain thanks to Jacques De-lors who developed social dialogue and partnerships. Civil society dialogue should now be a stepping-stone for a structured relationship between the UK and the rest of Europe.

Oliver Röpke, President of the Workers’ Group, thanked the UK members of the Committee and particularly the British members of the Workers’ Group for their commitment to improving the working and living conditions of workers across the EU. He called for the protection of the economic, social and political ties that
had been developed with the UK as member of the EU. The links between civil society in the UK and the rest of the EU civil society would remain strong.

**Judith McKnight,** who gave a statement on behalf of the UK members of the Workers’ Group, expressed her gratitude for the support and solidarity the EESC showed towards the British people. She regretted that the concept of social partnership greatly varied in the UK and that currently there was no forum there bringing social partners together with representatives of UK civil society. However, the UK members of the EESC would never cease to care about EU civil society and would keep on playing their part in fighting any policy that threatened the well-being of UK and EU citizens and workers.
The December plenary hosted a debate on the theme “From development to partnership” and referred to an opinion on Africa and economic development (REX/516) drafted by Thomas Wagnsonner (Workers’ Group) and Arno Metzler (Diversity Europe Group). The opinion gives an outlook on the future relationship between the EU and Africa after the Cotonou ACP-EU Partnership Agreement, which will expire in 2020.

Thomas Wagnsonner introduced the debate by highlighting that an equal partnership between the EU and African countries was absolutely necessary. Besides fighting the roots of extreme poverty, an equal partnership included dignified living conditions, the emergence of a middle class and social security provision. In order to implement such steps, an investment of 600 billion Euro a year from mixed financial sources was necessary. Civil society would need to possess control and monitoring power to accompany this process.

Elena Bonell de Pascual and Oyewole Oginni followed up by presenting the “AU x EU Cooperation Hub”, an initiative that consists of civil society projects in 17 countries in Europe and Africa. Those projects aspired to be highly scalable and to provide answers to common challenges in both continents, the two representatives said.

Afterwards, Mikolaj Dowgielewicz, the permanent representative of the European Investment Bank to the EU, focused on the bank’s key role in facilitating access to capital for SMEs and microenterprises and especially for women in Africa. Closing the investment gap for basic infrastructure such as sanitary systems and electricity
was another main priority. However, there was a need to coordinate the partnership on the EU level in a better way, Dowgielewicz said.

The next speaker was Isabelle A.J. Durant for the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. In a crisis of multilateralism, she said, those countries which struggled to get a foot in international trades where those who suffered most from a WTO blockage. She also highlighted that climate change and digitalization would affect trade between the EU and Africa. Those two aspects should be included in any future ACP-EU Partnership Agreement. Regional trade agreements, such as the intra-African one, could also make an important contribution to development.

In the debate that followed, Markus P Manninen pointed out that education was a crucial pre-condition for any future development and job creation in Africa. For instance, millions of new teachers were needed to achieve the SDG goals. The EU should enable more exchange between Africa and Europe, for instance through expanding the Erasmus programme.

Rudy De Leeuw underlined that the goal of sustainable development should be to stimulate growth, job creation, peace, stability and human rights. An EU approach should also be people-centered, with a strong involvement of the civil society and trade unions. This would ensure that the benefits of cooperation served both African and EU citizens.

Berivan Öngörur emphasized that gender equality was a crucial point to consider in the relations between the EU and the African and Caribbean countries. Strengthening women’s participation in economic and social life was essential for development. Women and girls had to have their rightful role in society.

A final contribution came from Jutta Urpilainen, Commissioner for International Partnerships in the new Commission. She particularly mentioned that the European model of development had to evolve with global realities. There was a positive dynamism in the region with forward-looking people, and the EU’s narrative had to reflect this reality, she argued. The EU must be a solid ally for countries that pursue their own journeys towards achieving the SDG goals. The Commissioner also said that she would make it her priority to conclude negotiations on a post-Cotonou Agreement.
The Workers’ Group bid an emotional farewell to the UK members of the Workers’ Group for whom this was the last EESC plenary, with the Brexit Withdrawal Agreement coming into effect on 31st January 2020.

The Workers’ Group members thanked their British companions for their cooperation and friendship throughout the years and vowed to continue fighting for workers’ rights together with UK trade unions, in the UK and the EU.
On 10 December 2019, the President of the EESC Workers' Group, Oliver Röpke, and the Members of the Workers' Group invited the Members of the European Parliament to a reception. The aim was to strengthen ties and cooperation with the European Parliament to better promote common issues, which are at the heart of citizens' and workers' concerns. The Workers' Group Members and the MEPs particularly highlighted the need to strengthen the social dimension of Europe during the new mandate of the EU institutions as well as the importance of the contribution of civil society to the Conference on the Future of Europe, which has been announced by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

More pictures on the following page
Castilla y León, in the north western part of the central Iberian Peninsula, is one of the most sparsely populated regions in Spain. It has also suffered decades of migration towards the urban centres in Madrid and the coast, exacerbated by industrial offshoring and relocation both within and towards outside the European Union. However, that is not the end of the story: workers, organised in trade unions, have managed to fight back, keeping their jobs (and the region) alive.

On the 29th of November, several Workers’ Group members, headed by Workers’ Group President, Oliver Röpke, visited the Economic and Social Council of Castilla y León, to learn about experiences of industrial offshoring and relocation in the region, hear and discuss successful trade union strategies to stop it, and develop a European Just Transition Strategy.

The Members of the Workers’ Group discussed these issues with MEP Iratxe García Pérez, S&D Group President, Regional Counsellor Germán Barrios García, and other members of regional civil society and trade union organisations.
During the EESC’s 548th plenary session, the EESC awarded the civil society prize to five organisations that **advocated for women’s participation in the European society and economy**. The EESC Vice-President in charge of Communication, Isabel Caño Aguilar, welcomed the fact that 117 initiatives from 27 member states had been submitted. She stressed that gender equality issues were at the heart of civil society’s concerns in Europe and that civil society initiatives contributed in an important way to making gender equality a norm. The prices were awarded to the following initiatives:

1st Price: Associazione Toponomastica Femminile: This association based in Italy aims at increasing the visibility of women in the public space, for instance through naming streets after female personalities.

2nd Price: Ogólnopolski strajk kobiet: This organisation initiated the “Polish Women’s Strikes” and especially postulated women’s autonomy over their reproductive rights.

3rd Price: Association NAIA: This initiative developed and implemented the “Fairytale Project”, a project that enables children to question gender stereotypes at an early age.

4th Price: Ohjelmisto- ja e-business ry: The “Finnish Software and E-Business Association” provides training and guidance for women to facilitate their entry in the IT sector, especially in the field of coding and software development.

5th Price: The Brussels Binder: The initiative provides an accessible database of female experts on different topics. Their aim is to increase their visibility at events, in public debates and in the media.
Laurent Berger, President of the European Trade Union Confederation, was invited in the framework of the increased cooperation that the Workers’ Group is seeking with ETUC and national trade unions as well as other important stakeholders. He focused particularly on the need to implement the social pillar through concrete measures covering workers’ rights, education and training, public services, non-discrimination, the fight against poverty, social and wage dumping, etc. At this pivotal phase for Europe, when the Commission was showing determination to move forward on environmental and social policies, the trade union movement, which has always been a progressive force, should offer constructive solutions to the many challenges Europe faced, to show that it heard citizens’ expectations.
Miriam Dalli, Member of the European Parliament (S&D Vice-President) in charge among others of the Green New Deal, was invited to present the Parliament’s expectations as regards this Deal, which outlines the Commission’s plan for climate neutrality by 2050. She stated that in the framework of the Green Deal, the European Parliament was pushing for a just transition that focused above all on workers, providing upskilling and education. Concrete measures were needed to ensure that all industrial sectors would have to contribute to the zero-emissions schemes, including aviation, shipping and road transport. Above all, she insisted, in the struggle to achieve a carbon-free economy, some countries needed to make much larger efforts than others and the EU should ensure that enough resources were available to allow them to make the leap.
How do we shape the transformation of work and the economy?

On 20/11/2019, Oliver Röpke, President of the EESC Workers’ Group, participated in a debate organised by the Institute of Economic and Social Research of the Hans-Böckler Foundation (WSI) in Berlin on how to shape the transformation of the world of work and the economy in a fair and inclusive way, so that no one is left behind.

The debates were introduced by Norbert Kluge, Member of the Workers’ Group, and scientific Director of the Institute for Co-Determination and Corporate Governance at the Hans-Böckler Foundation.

Photo from L to R: Nicolas Schmidt, European Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, Reiner Hoffmann, Chair of the German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB), Bettina Kohlrausch, Sociologist, Achim Truger, Economist, Oliver Röpke, President of the Workers’ Group
03/12/2019
Meeting with AFCO President Antonio Tajani about the conference on the Future of Europe

04/12/2019
Meeting with MEP Agnes Jongerius – S&D EMPL coordinator
Meeting with Commissioner Vestager

06/12/2019
Intervention in the ordinary congress of the Independent Luxembourg Trade Union Confederation (OGB L) (Luxembourg)

16/12/2019
Meeting with Isabelle Schömann ETUC
Meeting with Marie-Hélène Ska from Belgian Christian Trade Union

17-18/12/2019
ETUC Executive Committee Committee

22/01/2020
Meeting with Laurent Berger, ETUC President and Miriam Dalli, S&D MEP