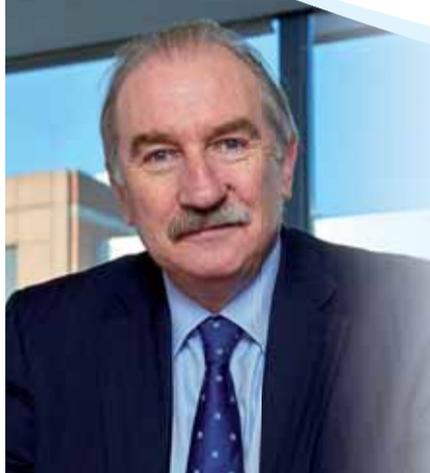




EESC info

European Economic and Social Committee
A bridge between Europe and organised civil society
May 2016 | EN



EDITORIAL

Dear readers,

Another month has gone by and as the emotional turmoil in the aftermath of the Brussels terrorist attacks subsides making room for a soberer mood, the world is still watching Europe as it handles on-going challenges – migration, Brexit, the Greek debt crisis, to mention just a few.

Most of these challenges continue under the surface. A much debated agreement with Turkey is still being discussed and its full consequences are yet to become apparent. Do we really believe it can offer a lasting solution to these swelling human flows, which, all experts agree, will keep swelling? Where is the European solution that this Committee has called for?

Brexit is also on the boil. Will it go out or burn us all on 23 June, not just the UK but the rest of Europe and the unthinkable consequences of a UK exit? I am a fervent believer in Europe, I sincerely hope that the "In" camp will win through with reason in the end. I come from Northern Ireland and Europe underpins so much of what we have achieved in building bridges between communities. In my view, an "out" vote risks knocking down bridges with the rest of Europe and even the world.

And what about the Greek debt crisis? While politicians have been busy preventing refugees from entering Europe and the UK from exiting, "the mother of all EU crises", as the Financial Times warned last week, "has slowly and quietly been gathering steam again", and with the risk of a payment default unless Greece receives its next round of bailout aid, the agonising prospect of Grexit will loom large again.

The EU needs to find lasting solutions to these challenges if it is to regain the public confidence it has lost in recent years. And, as the world looks up to Europe as a paradigm of a once permanent battlefield turned into an area of lasting peace, democracy, prosperity and openness, let Europe offer solutions that are worthy of Europe – bold, innovative and humane. The EESC stands ready to contribute, with its ideas and proposals, to this European effort. Is anybody out there listening?

Michael Smyth
EESC Vice-President for Budget

DIARY DATES

**25-26 May 2016/
EESC, Brussels:**
EESC plenary session

**28 May 2016 /
EESC, Brussels:**
Open Day

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SOON IN THE EESC

The Netherlands: resourceful & future-proof

As of 25 May 2016, the EESC will be hosting an exhibition to showcase Dutch creative industries specialising in delta and maritime technology, innovation and sustainability. The exhibition is being organised in cooperation with the Dutch Presidency of the EU and will be displayed in Foyer 6 of the JDE building. It will run until 24 June 2016. (sk/dm)



Netherlands Enterprise Agency

Two-way integration policies will benefit refugees and locals, according to the EESC



Christa Schweng, rapporteur, and Panagiotis Gkofas, co-rapporteur

There must be a stronger focus on integration policies and using best practice to achieve results, notes the EESC in an opinion adopted at its April plenary. If integration is successful, it will lead to social cohesion, economic growth and job creation in Europe. But better communication and engagement with host

communities – media, local authorities, trade unions, employer organisations, NGOs – is therefore needed to create a positive climate for new arrivals and win full public support.

The EESC calls for investment in targeted measures such as language

courses and vocational training: "Language training should be provided soon after registration, if a positive decision on asylum status is expected," says Christa Schweng, rapporteur on the issue. "Training should include basic information on values, culture, and processes, and skills and qualifications must be identified." Fast-track integration of unaccompanied minors into the school system or guidance on vocational training opportunities should be provided. "We are convinced that integration of refugees is an absolute must for our societies if we want to preserve social cohesion. A lack of integration can lead to parallel communities, which may destabilise the host countries. It is therefore in our own interest to start integration measures from a very early stage", added Ms Schweng and co-rapporteur Panagiotis Gkofas. (cad)

Legislation on firearms must be more ambitious in order to increase public safety, insists the EESC

The recent tragic events in Europe have intensified the debate on the revision of the Directive on the acquisition and possession of weapons. Public safety is increasingly under threat and there is a pressing need to counter the ease with which people can get hold of firearms, which continue to fall into the hands of radical groups, organised crime and disturbed individuals.

The EESC believes that the proposed clarifications and new and more consistent rules on marking and destroying weapons are a significant improvement. However, the EESC insists that legislation on firearms should not just be an immediate response to recent acts of terrorism. In its opinion on the control of the acquisition and possession of weapons adopted at its April plenary session, the EESC offers some specific measures. Since not only weapon, but also ammunition traceability is important, the industry should be encouraged to study the possibility

of placing indelible marks on bullets, as it is normally bullets – not weapons – that are left behind at crime scenes, and marking of this type could be a valuable source of information in police investigations. The EESC believes that such data, if made available via interoperable databases run by authorities, would make investigations much more effective.

Another approach could be to follow the example of the Australian and UK buyback programmes. In 1997 Australia embarked on a radical overhaul of its laws on weapons which led to the surrender of 700 000 weapons and, together with some new restrictions, to a drastic fall in firearms-related homicides.

Another area which needs attention is 3D printing – technological developments can be used to manufacture weapons that are just as lethal as those made by conventional methods, but impossible to control or track and



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mostly made of materials that traditional security systems cannot detect.

The EESC supports the introduction of mandatory medical tests that meet minimum European quality requirements to assess physical and mental health for issuing or renewing licences. However, the directive could also set requirements regarding the frequency of training in the handling of firearms and the safe storage and transportation of weapons. (sg)



Civil society needs to be involved in all aspects of the Energy Union



Commission Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič and EESC President Georges Dassis

The EESC's opinion on the State of the Energy Union 2015 (rapporteur: Stéphane Buffetaut, Employers' Group) adopted at the EESC April plenary session calls for greater focus on the social dimension of the Energy Union and urges the Commission to include this among the evaluation criteria of the next annual report.

The EESC sees a need to improve the statistical foundations of reports – some of them are outdated, others incomprehensible or even non-existent. The EESC also remarks that governance of the Energy Union cannot be reduced to a purely administrative process, but requires a strong political will and shared vision in the Member States and the EU institutions.

During the plenary debate with EESC members, Commission Vice-President Šefčovič thanked the EESC for its support for the Energy Union and stressed the importance of the European Energy Dialogue proposed by the EESC.

In its opinion on the external dimension of the EU's energy policy (rapporteur: Vitas Mačiulis, Various Interests Group), also adopted in April, the EESC urged once more the Commission and national governments to give a broad role to civil society organisations in the energy debate.

A key challenge for the EU is that over 50% of the energy consumed comes from imports. These must be secured. The circle of energy import partners must be expanded by establishing dialogue with new and reliable energy suppliers.

A strong external dimension of the EU's energy policy can only stem from a common EU position. The EESC insists that "speaking with one voice" must be pursued in spite of the different energy mixes, energy import structures and traditional partners among the Member States. (sg)

European citizens are picking up the bill for tax avoidance

Aggressive tax planning, a practice used in particular by some multinational corporations, is eroding tax bases in the EU Member States by 50 to 70 billion Euros every year. The EU has finally decided to push for an end to this approach. The EESC strongly supports the Commission's proposal but calls for a more rigorous stance towards tax avoiders while safeguarding EU competitiveness through intense negotiations at OECD and G20 level.

In an **opinion** adopted at its April plenary, the EESC proposes a uniform implementation of rules along the lines of the OECD action plan on Tax Based Erosion and Profit Shifting across Member States. Furthermore, it urges the Commission and Member States to step up international negotiations under the OECD or the G20 to ensure uniform implementation at OECD level, including in the US.

"Taxes are an important instrument for states to compensate inequalities in our society. We need them for infrastructure, education and support for people in need. Therefore, tax avoidance cannot be seen as a peccadillo, in truth it is theft

from the state and in the end from society", said opinion rapporteur Mr. Dandea.

The EESC also recommends that the switch-over clause – a switch from tax exemption of foreign income to relief by credit – should be applied directly to all taxpayers who have generated income in jurisdictions acknowledged to be tax havens.

The EESC calls on the Commission to include in its directive the requirement that Member States disclose the data presented in the reports which will be subject to the automatic exchange of information, but considers that these reports should not be demanded from SMEs, in order to avoid a disproportionate cost impact.

A ranking list of countries and regions which refuse to apply good governance standards in tax matters should be drawn up. Given the damage done to Member States' tax bases by aggressive tax planning, the EESC is calling for a shorter deadline for the implementation of the directive than the three years currently envisaged. (sma)



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Making free movement fairer for all

Labour mobility is a founding principle of the EU and one of the achievements most highly valued by European citizens. It can help to create employment opportunities and prosperity for European citizens and companies.

In 2014, there were some 15 million mobile workers in the EU, compared with just under 12 million in 2006. In the same year, there were 8.3 million mobile workers of working age living and working in another Member State, which is equivalent to 3.4% of the entire workforce, in addition to the 1.6 million cross-border workers. "To be successful, free movement must be fair for all. The rules must guarantee equal treatment and non-discrimination on grounds of nationality", comments Laura González de Txabarri Etxaniz, rapporteur on the issue. "Unfair employment

practices are exploiting workers and creating "social dumping", while some Member States want to deny social benefits to mobile workers. On the other hand, the current climate, due to the migration crisis, is not favourable to labour mobility. Europe must show strength and determination in defending its principles and help mobile workers now more than ever".

The opinion highlights practical solutions such as beefed up labour inspections within and across Member States, increased coordination between national social security systems, and focusing on the needs of posted workers, notably by consulting the social partners before revision of the controversial Posting of Workers Directive at EU level. (cad)



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Digital contracts: EESC urges Commission to prevent consumer rights erosion

Adopted at the EESC's April plenary session, the Digital Contract Rights opinion (rapporteur: Jorge Pegado Liz) examines the European Commission's legislative proposals on the supply of digital content and the online sales of goods. The two are envisaged as a package with shared goals within the Digital Single Market Strategy.

The EESC agrees that a number of issues in this area need tackling, but disagrees with the legal basis the Commission cites. What is involved here, in the Committee's view, is not just completion of the single market, but the definition and protection of consumer rights. Measures rooted

in consumer policy would involve minimum harmonisation, leaving Member States free to adopt higher consumer protection standards.

The opinion finds unacceptable the different approaches to online and offline sales of goods that would arise if two systems were set up as a result of this Commission proposal. It argues strongly that the rights recognised for face-to-face contracts should also apply in legislation covering the online environment. While acknowledging some intangible content transactions as a special case, the EESC is adamant that no steps should be taken that undermine consumer rights.



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The EESC is also concerned that the directives fail to address a whole raft of points where harmonisation is needed – the age at which minors can conclude digital contracts, for example, and the "pay now" buttons on some social networks that do not link to the website of a responsible platform.

Regarding consumer protection in online purchasing of intangible goods – data security and privacy protection especially – the EESC thinks clear rules need to be established as a matter of urgency, since the UK is still the only Member State that has regulations of this kind. (sg/dr)

Trade for all – a lever for a fairer global system

In its opinion Trade for all – Towards a more responsible trade and investment policy, the EESC emphasises the use of trade agreements to promote sustainable development, human and social rights, fair and ethical trade and the fight against corruption. Following the European Commission's new "Trade for all" Communication, the EESC notes the need for greater civil society involvement in the negotiation and implementation process, given the absence of any reference in the communication to the civil society monitoring mechanisms that cover the Trade and Sustainable Development (TSD) chapters in current EU trade agreements.

The Committee believes that a high-level and well-informed debate at EU and national level will help secure wider engagement and public support for a fairer global trade system, as trade policy must reflect European values. The opinion therefore welcomes the Commission's commitment to ensuring responsible management of global supply chains. The EESC hopes that the link between trade agreements and the EU's approach to implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals will be taken into account. (mm)

How serious is the Commission about citizens' participation? asks the EESC on ECI Day



"The European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) is an instrument for citizens to take a role in European policy making. After 5 years of experience we see it is not working properly. It is time for the European Commission to act on the institutions' recommendations" said Michael Smyth, EESC Vice-President at the ECI DAY 2016, organised by the EESC on 20 April in Brussels. Many of the participants from civil society organisations were disappointed not only that the Commission postponed the review of the ECI, but also that Commissioner Timmermans was not present at the ECI Day.

The EESC is not alone in its endeavours to help the ECI finally becoming what the Treaty of Lisbon intended, namely an innovative instrument for transnational participatory democracy:

- the European Ombudsman drew up 11 guidelines for improvement;
- the European Parliament sent a resolution with clear and specific proposals for a revised ECI;
- the Committee of the Regions adopted an opinion calling for a rapid and substantial revision of the ECI;
- last but not least also the Commission in its April 2015 report recognised that organisers face many difficulties and proposed amendments, but instead of delivering these amendments has postponed the ECI review.

The main conclusions of the hearing will feed into the EESC opinion on a reviewed ECI which is currently being prepared. The EESC has been actively involved in the ECI process as facilitator and institutional mentor. (sma) ●

Circular Economy: the EESC calls for greater ambition and comprehensive targets

In its opinion on the Commission's Circular Economy Package adopted at its April plenary, the EESC welcomes the proposals as a step in the right direction. One critical question remains, however: will this be enough to shift European economies to a truly circular model that decouples economic prosperity from the use of natural resources and multiplies economic and social benefits?

Producers should be encouraged to develop business models in which leasing and selling goods as services become standard practice and all costs are internalised, and Extended Producer Responsibility schemes should be mandatory for Member States. Manufacturers should also be obliged to provide information on the expected lifespan of their products.

In the EESC's view, the planned revision of the eco-design directive must take into account the full product life cycle, including durability, repairability and the availability/affordability of spare parts, and should require manufacturers unconditionally to disclose repair and service information. The EESC also wishes to see a total ban on built-in obsolescence.

The EESC proposes to develop support mechanisms to give people on a lower income access to higher quality and to goods and services that initially entail higher costs. These could include government-backed lending schemes or manufacturer-backed financing schemes with lower rates applied to products with a longer life-span. But accurate labelling will also help consumers make informed choices.

The EESC believes it is important to identify at an early stage those who might lose out as a result of this transition and take appropriate social protection measures, including education, training and retraining. As for raising awareness, this is a long-term endeavour, which needs to target society as a whole and should start from as early as nursery school to prepare a new generation of responsible consumers and drivers of behavioural change.

The EESC also offers to actively promote networks of civil society actors advocating the transition to a circular economy model and explore possibilities for a **European Forum for a Circular Economy** to provide opportunities for connecting ideas and exchange and raise awareness around best practices. (sma) ●

Slovakia prepares to take EU helm

This July, Slovakia will begin its first six-month presidency of the Council of the European Union. Slovakia's tenure at the helm of the Council will be the EU's 116th rotating presidency, preceded by the current Dutch presidency and followed by the Maltese presidency.

The Slovak presidency will focus on a number of questions of particular importance to the EU, such as the single market, the energy union, the cohesion policy, the capital markets union, the midterm review of the MFF 2014-2020, the annual EU budget for 2017 and enlargement.

In addition to long-planned agenda items, the migration crisis, a revision of the Dublin regulations and the counterterrorism will also be high on the agenda. Moreover, the issues that Slovakia will address during its presidency will reflect other developments, including the results of the UK's EU referendum.

Public interest in EU affairs in Slovakia is the lowest it has ever been within the EU. The presidency will be an opportunity to engage with

the public on European issues and Slovakia's role in the EU.

Cooperation between the EESC and the presidency is quite intense. The Slovak government has requested four exploratory opinions from the Committee regarding:

- the impact of technological developments on the social security system and labour law;
- the midterm evaluation of Horizon 2020;
- the new electricity market design and potential impacts on vulnerable consumers; and
- future-proof regulation.

An extraordinary meeting of the EESC Bureau will take place on 14 June in Bratislava.

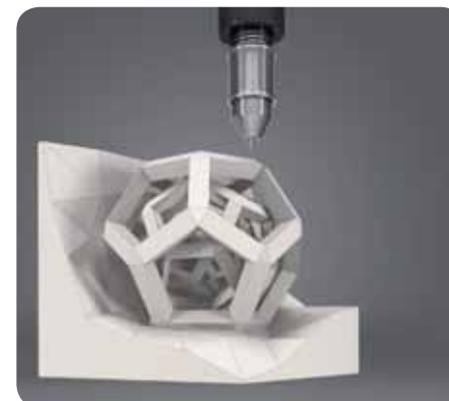
The final version of the programme of the Slovak presidency will be adopted in June. It will be presented by Ivan Korčok, the State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic and Government Plenipotentiary for the Slovak Presidency of the Council of the European Union, during the EESC's July plenary session on 13 July. (as/mb/ns/pbs) ●

The EESC calls for e-inclusion and digital knowledge for all European citizens

Representatives of industry, policy-makers and civil society gathered at the **2016 Digital Day** on 21 April to discuss the current risks and opportunities as well as the chances for inclusion and the potential for exclusion created by the digital economy. The event, co-organised by the EESC and Confrontations Europe, focused on the digital economy at the heart of EU competitiveness, boosting e-skills and facilitating job conversion, and the role of civil society.

The EESC shares the view that the digital economy is an area of strategic economic importance for EU Member States. Digital data is now the basis for activity in all areas of the economy, government, culture, and social and health services. Making innovative use of this data is the main source of increased productivity for the EU economy. However, the EESC insists that to fully unleash the potential of a knowledge-based economy, it is very important to retrain workers so that they have the necessary skills to work in newly emerging jobs and economic sectors. This is especially important given that 80% of jobs will require digital knowledge and skills by 2020.

The EESC argues that for everyone to be able to benefit from the digital revolution, access



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to infrastructure and tools must be seen as a fundamental right. The EESC also believes that the EU and the Member States should guarantee digital accessibility via lifelong e-skills training. Particular attention should be paid to vulnerable groups in society. Civil society has an essential role to play in this regard – the EESC urges the EU and national and local authorities to use existing dialogue structures to meet with civil society representatives in order to more accurately identify what is needed in the digital arena. (sg) ●

The human face of the refugee crisis – Giles Duley exhibition hosted by the EESC



Giles Duley at the EESC

Following up on its work on refugees and migration, the EESC is currently hosting an exhibition of photographs by internationally acclaimed photojournalist and former war correspondent Giles Duley, which portrays the many men, women and children who have been crossing the Mediterranean and arriving on the Greek island of Lesbos.

Giles Duley, a British national, is well known for his photographs of humanitarian issues and the consequences of conflict. The exhibition is the result of cooperation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Opening the event, Georges Dassis, EESC President, said: "Border security must not lead to the rejection of those who need protection for humanitarian reasons". In his turn,

Giles Duley said: "There is no way that this should have been allowed to happen. I was shocked and overwhelmed by what I saw", and Sophie Magennis of UNHCR commented: "These photos give voices to the voiceless and faces to numbers. The refugee situation in Europe is manageable only with coordinated efforts. We need to see the completion of a genuine Common European Asylum System with real solidarity."

Mr Duley's personal experience has inspired his humanitarian work; he was severely injured whilst following his passion for photography in Afghanistan. The injury did not affect his determination to return to photography. His previous exhibition, **One Second of Light**, portrays the devastating human cost of conflict. The exhibition runs until 20 May. (mm) ●

Foreign policy begins at home

The new EU strategy on foreign and security policy

The EESC's recent opinion on the proposed Strategy on foreign and security policy emphasises the link between domestic and foreign policy, noting that European values are being undermined by social inequality within the EU. "It does not seem realistic to envisage a more structured, shared and effective EU foreign and security policy without tackling the increase in economic and social inequalities among its Member States," claims the opinion's rapporteur, José María Zufiaur Narvaiza, "Europe must work on reaffirming its position as 'the defender of equality' and a promoter of 'freedom, security and prosperity'."

To defend democracy abroad means further developing a strong civil society at home. This is "key to developing closer ties with civil society in other countries". In the EESC's view, an increased EU budget for external action is now called for together with easing candidate countries' path to accession, an effective Common Security and Defence Policy, responding to the flow of refugees and migrants and promoting trade and investment. (mm) ●

The Aviation Strategy for Europe will succeed only with the support of all stakeholders, insists the EESC

Representatives of industry, policy-makers and various stakeholders gathered at the public hearing on delivering the EU Aviation Strategy, held by the EESC on 21 April. The hearing, which focused on the Aviation Strategy presented by the Commission in December 2015 and its impact on job creation, economic growth and getting stakeholders on board, will contribute to the EESC's work on its opinion on the Aviation Package.

"The Aviation Strategy should create a better climate for investment to encourage EU investors. This will increase the competitiveness of the sector and its overall role for the economy and, in consequence, promote growth and jobs", said Jacek Krawczyk, EESC rapporteur for the Aviation Strategy.

"We need to ensure that European aviation stays in the lead", said Violeta Bulc, European Commissioner for Transport, in her keynote speech.

The EESC fully endorses the Commission's holistic approach. The strategy has a chance of succeeding only with broad and strong support from all parts of the aviation value network. One of the aims of the EESC opinion will be to identify the incentives needed to make the strategy attractive and beneficial for all: EU Member States, airlines, airports, air navigation service providers (ANSPs), manufacturers, trade unions, environmentalists and consumer organisations. (sg) ●

A HOPE FOR EUROPE! Culture, cities, and new narratives

How can culture and cities help build hope and a new narrative for Europe? How does culture drive economic growth? How can cities transform cultural diversity into social innovation, cohesion and trust? Conversely, how can culture and the arts redevelop and regenerate cities, giving them a new identity? What role can art and culture play in articulating and consolidating Europe's identity and relationships with our neighbours? Is it time for a New Renaissance for a New Europe?

These are some of the questions that will be explored at the high-level conference to be held in Brussels on 20 and 21 June 2016, organised by the Various Interests Group of the European

Economic and Social Committee (EESC), headed by its president Luca Jahier, in close partnership with the European Parliament's Culture and Education Committee, the Council of Europe and the Centre for Fine Arts (Bozar). The event will explore how, why and when culture matters today in Europe.

More specifically, the conference will explore four themes:

- Culture as a vehicle for economic growth
- Culture as an instrument for redeveloping cities and territories
- Culture as a tool for integration and inclusiveness
- Reshaping European identity within Europe and beyond.



Luca Jahier, President of the Various Interests Group

The event will also provide an opportunity for the inaugural presentation of the eponymous study which was commissioned by the EESC to Culture Action Europe and United Cities and Local Government (UCLG-Agenda 21).

In the evening of 20 June, a cultural event will be held at the EESC, demonstrating how culture can become a global instrument of dialogue, understanding and peace-building. (cl) ●

Upcoming Maltese EU Presidency - the Employers' Group's involvement

Preparations for the upcoming Maltese Presidency of the Council of the EU were one of the themes for the working visit by the Employers' Group President, Jacek Krawczyk, to Malta. President Krawczyk expressed the group's willingness to cooperate actively both with Maltese employers' organisations and with the government to prepare for the Presidency.



Jacek Krawczyk, President of Employers' Group, with Ian Borg, Maltese Minister for European Affairs

All of the major Maltese employers' organisations (the Malta Chamber of Commerce, Enterprise and Industry,

the Malta Hotel and Restaurants Association, the General Retailers and Traders Union and the Malta Business

Bureau) are involved in preparing for the Presidency. They will identify four main themes to form the employers' agenda for it, which will then be formally presented to the Maltese Prime Minister and the Parliamentary Secretary as well as to the main employers' organisations in Brussels.

Malta will take on the EU Presidency for the first time in January 2017, following the Slovak Presidency which is scheduled for the second half of 2016. (lj) ●

Trade unions and the UK's EU referendum

On 21 April, the enlarged presidency of the Workers' Group met British trade unions in London to discuss the UK referendum. The broad majority of trade unions in the UK were in favour of remaining in the EU because, as several speakers pointed out, Europe should provide an opportunity for all in terms of rights, employment and economic prosperity.

Participants highlighted the excellent timing of a study carried out by the Labour Research Department at the request of the Workers' Group, which was published just as the UK government was tabling a trade union bill that represented the biggest crackdown on trade union rights for 30 years. This study (*The Crisis and the Evolution of Labour Relations in the UK*, available at:



The enlarged presidency of the Workers' Group with British trade unions in London

<http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.group-2-studies.39081>) explains the bill's proposals and concludes inter-

alia that several measures taken under the Conservative-led government have shifted the balance of power on a range of workplace issues towards employers.

Participants therefore felt that UK workers were better off within the EU, where the social *acquis* protects them from such attacks on their rights, and that workers in the UK and EU had a common interest in working together to improve Social Europe.

The meeting ended on a positive note, with participants emphasising their support for a fair and social Europe and their determination to oppose the UK trade union bill and any attempt to reduce workers' rights in Britain or elsewhere. The pillar of social rights recently proposed by the European Commission forms a solid basis for trade unions to build on in this common endeavour. (mg/fs) ●

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