

L'Europe sociale mérite plus que de la communication...

Mardi 7 Novembre 2017

Lettre ouverte au groupe S&D sur le pilier des droits sociaux

Mardi 7 novembre dernier, j'adressais aux membres du groupe S&D une lettre ouverte, co-signée par de nombreux collègues de la commission de l'Emploi et des Affaires sociales, pour contribuer au débat sur le pilier social.

Brussels, 7 November 2017

Dear colleagues,

As you will have learnt, the negotiating teams of the three institutions reached a deal last Friday on the text for the inter-institutional proclamation on a European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR). This proclamation is to be made in the context of the forthcoming Social Summit in Göteborg, 17 November 2017.

While any positive move in the direction of a stronger Social Europe is always good to make, it is worth to strike a serious note of caution before our Group, and our political family, join the celebration of the EPSR, and it is important to keep our heads clear.

It is equally important to assess this development and our best attitude to it in the context of the forthcoming European elections. One year and a half away from the vote, we need an assertive, vocal and clear political strategy of our own, through which we embody the progressive alternative to conservatism

Let's indeed not forget that the proclamation will be made by three leading members of the EPP family - Jean-Claude Juncker, Donald Tusk, and Antonio Tajani. We should not be naive, but lucid. They will use this moment to position themselves as the defenders of a social Europe, to fill in Jean-Claude Juncker's empty triple A social agenda and despite the fact that this Commission has so far had very limited initiative in the social field, and despite an EPP Group constantly obstructing our best efforts to take social rights further in the European Parliament.

We should not have a short memory. The dire management of the financial crisis, through which brutal austerity provoked a double-dip recession, threw many million Europeans unnecessarily into long term unemployment, and made poverty and social exclusion explode across Europe, is primarily to be attributed to an EPP-led European Commission under José Manuel Barroso and to an EPP-affiliated German Finance Minister, Wolfgang Schäuble. If Social Europe today is in such a poor state, it is largely the responsibility of the EPP family.

A careful analysis of what the EPSR is, and what it is not, is necessary before undue enthusiasm takes over in our ranks. The EPSR is not a Social Protocol annexed to the Treaties, as we have been calling for so long, and today there is no evidence to support the idea that the Pillar would later on be transformed into a Protocol. Furthermore, what would be the value added of this, as the principles

included in the Pillar are essentially already in the Treaty and in the Charter. The EPSR is not a new set of social rights. The EPSR does, in itself, not create any legal progress for Social Europe. The Pillar is essentially a recuperation of social principles and rights already contained in politically and legally more important texts - the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union and the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

The contested paragraph 14 in the preamble inserts a complete firewall between the principles and rights, and their possible legal enforcement: "For them to be legally enforceable, the principles and rights first require dedicated measures or legislation to be adopted at the appropriate level". The EPSR falls very much short of the EP resolution voted in December 2016. In its paragraph 1, the resolution demands that the EPSR should not be "limited to a declaration of principles or good intentions but reinforces social rights through concrete and specific tools (legislation, policy-making mechanisms and financial instruments)...". However, this is what has been agreed, leading in essence to a proclamation of rights pre-existing since years in more important texts.

The EPSR illustrates well the political trap we need to get out of as social democrats, following the termination of the grand coalition. One year and a half away from the European elections, we need an assertive, vocal and clear political strategy of our own, through which we embody the progressive alternative to conservatism. Uncritically joining a political choir dominated by EPP voices may not be the best way to achieve this.

Instead, we should remain critical in the face of this exercise of political communication led by conservatives. We should insist on the fact that Europe needs far more than political communication in the social field, at a time of still high unemployment, extreme levels of poverty unseen in decades, and rising inequalities. Instead of spending a full three years of this mandate to arrive at such a proclamation, the institutions should have invested this precious time in strengthening workers' rights in actual legislation and reinforcing policies and instruments to fight poverty and reverse inequalities. This is the message an assertive and engaged S&D Group should be heard by.

Co-signed by:

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