

# Where's "work" in the Euro-elections?

Think about it. How many clear proposals to improve working conditions and tackle insecurity have you heard in the European Parliament election campaign?

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**Growing numbers of European workers are trapped in new, adverse types of contract.**  
Image: © Belga/DPA



Wide divergences and heated debates abound in the current European election campaign. For many candidates, work is like sex for the Puritans. They see it everywhere, but will not talk about, preferring to "harp on" about immigration, environment, growth, citizenship. Nothing easier than to twist the word "security" to fit every occasion ... while accepting the spread of casual hire-and-fire.

Britain's PM David Cameron has unleashed a war of words against Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants, while his government spearheads a fierce campaign against any legislation to harmonize working conditions in Europe. He advocates naked self-interest while feigning regret at its consequences. It would be wrong to disregard the danger of such a discourse which goes far beyond the confines of any one political party.

### The European project in crisis

The European Union as we know it derives from a political plan shaped by the "economic boom decades"<sup>1</sup> – that period of reconstruction which began in the aftermath of World War Two and ended in the mid-1970s in economic crisis, labour unrest, and the slow disintegration of the Soviet bloc. During this time, economic liberalism was tempered by big concessions to labour in the founding states of the European Union. Sustained growth was underpinned by the dominance of European industry in high added value activities (car making, chemicals, aerospace, etc.). Organized labour struggles achieved a less unequal distribution of wealth than in the preceding and subsequent periods.

The time was right for a culture of compromise. Social security was developing, collective labour relations became institutionally entrenched. Quantity came before

quality of employment. The creation of the European Economic Community can be seen from two angles: 1) an internal Western European process of states coming together around a shared plan, 2) the affirmation of a Western European distinctiveness in its alliances which marked it out from the United States and was the antithesis of the Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe.

The 1958 Treaty of Rome prioritized "four freedoms", translating enforced competition between workers, goods, companies and capital into law. Social policy was focused on establishing a common labour market and its consequence – the coordination of social security schemes. Equal pay for men and women was conceived as an economic requirement to avoid unfair competition.

It was not until 1974 that a first Community social action programme was adopted in the wake of the tidal wave of violent clashes that had swept Europe in 1968. The urgent issue to be addressed was how to get labour/social conditions in different countries more closely aligned. The European Union's budget was dwarfed by the sum of national budgets,

so the chosen policy instrument was law. It had a ripple effect in pushing Member States to espouse the Community goals. It could be supplemented by other means (social dialogue, cohesion funds, defining statistical indicators, etc.), but there was no economic mechanism for a large-scale redistribution of resources between states. Nor was there any strong "economic governance" with industrial policies, planned investment or the creation of public services at European level. So legal rules had to be created in order to take it beyond a simple free trade area. And that is what happened between 1974 and 2004. It was a time of relative stop-go. A body of Community social law and a system of collective labour relations were gradually built up. Whole areas remained untouched but working conditions were prioritized with the adoption of more than thirty Directives.

In the past decade, this form of governance has hit the buffers. EU enlargement has made it more difficult to adopt common rules. The policy direction taken by the Commission in Mr Barroso's two terms of office has also played an important role. Increasingly

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<sup>1</sup> Pessis C., Topçu S., Bonneuil C. (2013) Une autre histoire des "Trente Glorieuses". Modernisation, contestations et pollutions dans la France d'après-guerre, Paris, La Découverte. The book lays to rest the myths about this period of history, summoning up the voices of those defeated and forgotten by the post-war policies of modernization and growth.

formalized criteria subjected any new legislation to cost-benefit-based impact studies<sup>2</sup>. In the buzzwords of the time, there had to be created a legal environment supportive to businesses<sup>3</sup>. The European Court of Justice has further developed this trend, hemming workers' fundamental rights into a straitjacket where they cannot inhibit economic competition.

Canadian journalist Naomi Klein<sup>4</sup> has examined how disastrous events have been used to foist on people a policy that goes against the interests of the majority. In Europe, the crisis has been used to justify deregulation and austerity policies that got under way well before the 2008 crisis. It is a vicious circle: more austerity leads to more crisis; more crisis serves as a pretext for more austerity. In countries where the troika<sup>5</sup> enables the European Commission to act without a political counterweight, the disaster in social and employment terms is undeniable.

### Worsening working conditions

Worsening working conditions do not stem from these political factors alone, but are bound up with the rise of social inequalities worldwide – a process well-documented in a recent book by French economist Thomas Piketty<sup>6</sup> which shows that the gap between workers and capital owners has widened over the last thirty years.

This decline does not appear as a sudden meltdown, but remains barely perceptible, like the outline of an island in the mist. It does not hit all categories with equal intensity, whence the difficulty of tackling it politically. The picture is clear for employment – job insecurity and joblessness are the two jaws of the pincers. For some physical risks, though, the picture is no different or even slightly better. So the bigger picture is mixed. What stands out most is the worsening inequalities within the world of work itself.

### Gender equality

Germany is held up as a model of economic recovery. Lower unemployment, good manufacturing performance, a trade surplus, etc. Chancellor Angela Merkel was re-elected in September 2013 with a near-overall

2. The Commission is not solely responsible for this development. All the institutions involved in the legislative process (Council, Parliament and Commission) were in agreement.

3. A central reference among the "classic" justifications for this tipping point in Community policies is Wim Kok's November 2004 report, *Facing the Challenge. The Lisbon strategy for growth and employment*.

4. Klein N. (2007) *The shock doctrine: the rise of disaster capitalism*, New York, Metropolitan Books.

5. The troika refers to the experts who represent the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund who keep regular watch to see that countries which the EU has put under financial assistance programmes meet the requirements set in exchange for the assistance.

6. Piketty T. (2014) *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

7. Giraud O., Lechevalier A. (2013) *Les femmes au cœur de l'éclatement de la norme d'emploi en Allemagne*, Travail, genre et sociétés, 30, 189-194.

majority. Her coalition with the Social Democrats assures her of broad support in parliament. The German "miracle" is often cited as a means of magicking pessimism away. One of its features is the massive rise in female employment rates. At what price? In 2010, a third of women had to settle for low pay (against 14% of men). Part-time work (about half of women) has exploded with some of the shortest working hours in Europe (around 18 hours). This means not enough income to be financially independent, fewer promotion and training

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opportunities and less job discretion. Part-time work reinforces structural inequality in the family. Women's free time goes only into unpaid work in the family (household chores, child care, etc.)<sup>7</sup>.

### Ageing

Many attacks on social security are excused away by population ageing. The ideology of employers is that longer life expectancy means people should expect to work longer in life.

This reasoning overlooks two things: 1) the less well-off categories have no hope of added healthy life years, largely because of their employment and working conditions, 2) the wealth produced has increased dramatically in thirty years. A more equal distribution of that wealth would pay the steadily rising social protection bill.

Unless working conditions improve, raising the retirement age will only result in unthinkable exclusion for the categories of workers exposed to the worst risks.

Work intensification and individualization make longer working lives a double bind. Overwork wears workers out and makes them want to stop working as soon as possible, while creating inter-worker rivalries destroys team cohesion and the informal allocation of work according to individual

abilities, bypassing management's dictates. An increased concentration of work is only superficially more productive. It results in burnout, uncorrectable failings and prevents the handing-on of experience.

### "Sustainable Development"

Few now deny the scale of the ecological crisis, in sharp contrast to the United States where industry lobbies are carrying much of the Republican Party and many voters into climate change denial.

Recognizing the importance of the issue is not enough to frame an effective policy. The question of working conditions features nowhere in the debates on environmental issues when many environmental problems (greenhouse gas emissions, squandering of resources, pollution, etc.) are inextricably linked to our relationship to work. Work intensification and enforced competition produce dissatisfaction with work: the feeling of being unable to do a proper job, reduced sociability among workers, work spilling over into home life, etc. All these factors are apt to turn us into compulsive consumers. Lacking recognition at work, the acquisition of possessions raises our self-worth. Advertising shamelessly exploits this "need" to compensate. The real usefulness of a product becomes secondary. The object's symbolic importance is all: it makes us appealing, attractive or superior to others. It gives us class. A vicious circle settles in: work more to consume more; consume more because work is overwhelming and eats into life. Rather than tackling it head-on, many "green" policies swing between unproductive guilt-tripping ("we are all responsible") and commoditizing environmental awareness through a proliferation of green labels. People do not vote with their wallet. Consumer influence on industrial choices is marginal.

### Democracy

Democracy is an underlying issue in many debates. Falling turnouts among working class voters, the rise of parties led by a "man of the moment", the feeling that it is the "us" of society versus the "them" of institutions.

## High heels and cancer

A European agreement was reached in the hairdressing sector in April 2012. Trade unions and employers called for a directive to prevent allergies, skin diseases and musculoskeletal disorders. Many hairdressers suffer from these health problems, and some have also contracted bladder cancer from the chemicals used for colouring hair. For the first time since 1996, the Commission has failed to respond to the joint call from the European social partners to turn a framework agreement into a directive with binding effect.

Why? There is a timeline to the reasons. Britain's right-of-centre *Daily Mail* newspaper ran a headline on 9 April 2012 "High heels to be cut down to size under new EU proposals forcing hairdressers to wear non-slip flat shoes" reporting that "Employment Minister Chris Grayling vowed: 'We should be creating jobs, not killing them. This kind of stupidity

has to stop. It makes no sense and I will do everything I can to stop it.'"

In point of fact, the agreement between hairdressing sector unions and employers says nothing about banning the wearing of high heels. It merely recommends the wearing of "shoes with non-slip soles".

On 2 October 2013, the President of the Commission, Mr Barroso, drove the point home in an interview on German television's ARD network. He saw no reason to adopt EU rules on "hairdressers' shoes", using the feminine gender and betraying the disdain: they get given a "low risk" job and whinge about trifles.

The same day, the European Commission adopted a Communication entitled REFIT announcing a freeze on the proposed new laws on musculoskeletal disorders and improving the fight against occupational cancer. No further proposals will be put forward during its current term of office.

Raising the issue of work is no excuse for populist soundbites. Changes – and complex ones – must be made at many different levels. Widening the employment divide between "decision makers" and "operatives" would be a cure worse than the disease. The collective intelligence of workers is crucial to identify problems and devise solutions. If there is a democratic deficit in Europe, this is where it mainly lies: a lack of democracy at work. A growing percentage of workers is no longer covered by collective agreements. Nearly half of European workers have no access to any form of organized representation. Subcontracting chains make this situation worse by shifting much of the real power to the work specifiers. While there may be no easy answer to labour issues, there is one certain method – the battle for democracy in the workplace, to make politics a daily, practical exercise on the shopfloor.

Historians are wont to place the birth of democracy in ancient Greece. We should heed what this province of the world has to tell us. In a poem written in 1904, Constantin Cavafy imagines the various authorities of an ancient city paralyzed by waiting for the barbarians to come. The Senate has ceased making laws; the Emperor is preparing to welcome the invaders by ennobling them. The tension builds throughout the poem. The ending is abrupt. The barbarians do not come. Some even claim that they do not exist. "And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians? They were, those people, a kind of solution."

Politics today is less vivid than in the poem. But the question remains relevant. If work is not seen as a core focus of politics, many issues lose all real substance. They become invisible barbarians, the anguished waiting for whom precipitated the fall of ancient cities. ●