Preface

Developments on the European level during 2006 were marked by two opposing trends in the form of a strengthening of European economic integration and inertia with regard to the development of Europe as a political project. This opposition can be illustrated by, on the one hand, the final adoption by the Council of two widely discussed and highly controversial directives – the directive on services and the REACH directive on chemicals – and, on the other hand, the seemingly endless prolongation of the period of reflection on the European constitution, the effects of which seem to be to inhibit any progress and, to a certain extent, to provoke action by guaranteeing non-action. This contradiction of moving forward the economic agenda while putting the brakes on political progress is also very evident in the tension continuously arising between the need to build on previously achieved social rights and the drive towards deregulation in order to meet the challenge of globalisation. The coming years will be decisive for the European project. Will it rise to the challenge of reconfirming its commitment to Social Europe, and thereby live up to European citizens’ expectations, or will it head towards a flatter and less ambitious horizon?

This eighth edition of Social Developments in the European Union is marked by both continuity – in the reporting of important social developments at EU level – and impending change, as this will be the last year in which SALTSA – the joint research programme run by the Swedish confederations of employees and Sweden’s National Institute for Working Life (NIWL) – will be a co-publisher of this annual publication. Due to a decision by the Swedish government in December 2006 to close down the NIWL by July 2007, the SALTSA research programme will be discontinued after June 2007. This closure represents
a great loss for the research community, as well as for practitioners concerned with labour market issues. Both the NIWL and SALTSA have contributed enormously to the gathering of evidence on labour market conditions, not only in Sweden but also on a European level, and helped not only to increase knowledge but also to raise the quality of the evidence that can then be used to underpin policy- and decision-making. The ETUI-REHS and OSE will greatly miss this valuable partner as they pursue their endeavours to conduct high-quality problem-oriented research on issues of strategic importance for labour market issues across Europe.

Maria Jepsen (ETUI-REHS), Christophe Degryse, Lars Magnusson (SALTSA) and Philippe Pochet (OSE)