

Preface

In recent years “Social Europe” has equipped itself with a whole new set of tools. In 1997 the Amsterdam Treaty, in an attempt to meet the challenge of unemployment, introduced a new *European employment strategy*. Inspired by the EES, the EU Fifteen decided, at the Lisbon European Council in March 2000, to launch a new governance tool labelled the “open method of co-ordination” (OMC). Under the OMC, co-ordination has progressively made its way into other fields, most importantly, the fight against poverty and social exclusion and reform of the pension systems.

At the same time, “Political Europe” has to tackle different visions of its future as promoted by the political elites. The difficulties were vividly illustrated by the failure of the Nice European Council to achieve the thoroughgoing overhaul of the institutional machinery required to cope with accession by the applicant countries. The positive outcome of this failure was that it prompted the Fifteen to launch, in 2002, a constitutional debate in preparation for the next intergovernmental conference.

In the light of these rapid and frequently contradictory developments, the rise of populist movements comes as evidence of disaffection on the part of the population with this European edifice which is proving so troublesome to construct.

In this context, it is our conviction that the European venture can be continued only by means of broad dissemination of information and the launching of debates on the most controversial issues. In a nutshell, people must once more be given the opportunity to make informed choices in relation to the European Union. A dose of democratic debate

must be injected into the future directions to be taken by this politically constructed entity. In the absence of such debate, the EU will be increasingly experienced as a constraint or, at best, a necessary evil.

These debates and choices call also for the construction of transnational forums for dialogue. It is from this angle that the European Trade Union Institute, the German Hans Böckler Foundation and the Swedish trade union research programme SALTSA have come together with the *Observatoire social européen* to produce this assessment of European social policy covering the year 2001. This cooperation comes as a follow up to a number of joint projects between these four partners and is evidence of the relatively new capacity to operate strategically in networks. Published in German, English and French, this work aims to reach out to a broad public and to prompt reflection and debate on the state of and prospects for social Europe. We hope you will enjoy reading it.

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