Social Europe: what Parliament is doing on social policy

From childhood to retirement, social policies are important at all stages of our lives. Find out what EU rules Parliament is working on.

A wide range of challenges

Compared to the rest of the world, Europe has the best levels of social protection and also ranks highly in terms of quality of life and wellbeing. However, it faces a wide range of challenges.
The effects of the economic crisis are still deeply felt in many member states and, even though things have improved in many countries, great disparities remain within the EU. **Unemployment rates** are decreasing overall, but vary strongly among EU countries.

Low birth rates and an aging population also challenge the **sustainability of welfare systems**.

Working life is being transformed due to technological innovation, globalisation and the rise of the services sector. New business models in the sharing economy with more flexible forms of working are becoming more important.

**Competence in social policies: EU vs national governments**

The EU has only **limited competence** when it comes to social issues as most of it is up to national governments.

The responsibility for employment and social policies **lies mostly with the member states** and their governments. This means that national governments - and not the EU - decide on issues such as wage regulations, including minimum wage, the role of collective bargaining, pensions systems and retirement age, and unemployment benefits.

However, over the years, the **EU has been working on social issues** throughout the European integration process and come up with a series of instruments in the social sector. These include EU laws, funds and tools to better coordinate and monitor national policies. The EU also encourages countries to share best practices on issues such as social inclusion, poverty and pensions.

The Treaty of Rome in 1957 already included fundamental principles such as **equal pay for women and men** as well as the **right of workers to move freely** within the EU. To make this mobility possible, further provisions were adopted, such as rules for the mutual recognition of diplomas, guarantees regarding medical treatment when abroad and safeguards regarding already acquired pension rights.

In addition there are EU rules on **working conditions**, such as working time or part-time work, as well as legislation to tackle workplace discrimination and to ensure workers’ health and safety.

The EU complements and supports EU countries in their efforts to organise healthcare and improve the health of Europeans through funding and legislation on a wide range of topics, such as health products and services, safe food, tackling diseases, clean air or healthy workplaces.
In November 2017, the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission proclaimed the European Pillar of Social Rights to deliver new and more effective rights for people and support fair and well-functioning labour markets and welfare systems. The pillar is based on 20 principles and comprises a number of initiatives linked to equal opportunities and access to the labour market; fair working conditions; and adequate and sustainable social protection.

Since the early stages of European integration, the European Parliament has often called for the EU to be more active on social issues and has supported the Commission proposals in this area.

Social rights for Europeans working abroad

EU rules on social security coordination ensure that people do not lose their social security protection when moving to another EU country.

In 2019 MEPs approved plans to establish a European Labour Authority to ensure the fair and simple application of EU rules on labour mobility and social security coordination.

In 2018, Parliament approved new legislation on the posting of workers to ensure equal pay for equal work in the same place.

Assistance for the unemployed and the young

Launched in 1957, the European Social Fund is the EU’s main tool for promoting employment and social inclusion. It has helped millions of people to learn new skills and find jobs.

MEPs are working on a new streamlined version of the fund with a specific focus on EU youth and children. The European Social Fund Plus will merge a number of existing funds and programmes, providing more targeted and integrated support.

The European Social Fund explained
Working conditions

In 2019, the European Parliament adopted new rules introducing new minimum rights on working conditions to protect all workers in the EU, including the most vulnerable employees on atypical contracts and in non-standard jobs, such as gig economy workers.

MEPs regularly adopt updated EU rules on protection of people at the workplace, for example by setting stricter exposure limit values for harmful chemical substances.

Read more on how the EU improves workers' rights and working conditions.

Gender equality

The EU adopts legislation and issues recommendations and good practices to improve gender equality, be it at work, in politics or other fields. The European Parliament, with its women's rights committee, has always been a strong defender of the cause, and every year raises awareness by organising various events to mark International Women's Day.

MEPs also want to ensure a proper work-life balance. In 2019 they adopted new rules to better reconcile work and private life and strengthen rights for parents and carers.
Parliament has repeatedly asked the Commission to propose measures to narrow the gender pay and pension gap.

With its resolutions, Parliament also draws attention to the need to combat specific forms of violence against women, such as sexual harassment or cyberstalking, and to increase the consistency of gender equality policies and other policies such as trade, development or migration.

Parliament is in favour of women and men being equally represented in politics and in the current 9th legislative term, the percentage of women in high-level positions is higher than in the previous term. Eight out of 12 vice-presidents are women as are 12 of the 22 committee chairs.

Read more on how the Parliament’s fight for gender equality in the EU.

Improving public health

The EU regulates the authorisation and classification of medicines through the European medicines regulatory network. Once on the market, the safety of authorised products continues to be monitored.

EU legislation sets minimum health and safety requirements for the workplace: provisions for the use of equipment, the protection of pregnant and young workers and the exposure to noise or specific substances, such as carcinogens and mutagens.

The EU has rules guaranteeing a high level of safety at all stages of the food production and distribution process.

In 2018, a new regulation on veterinary medicinal products was adopted to curb the use of antibiotics in farming and halt the spread of resistance from animals to humans.

Bathing waters are monitored for bacteria by EU countries through the bathing water directive.

The European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) ensures that people living in the EU can have access to medically necessary, state-provided healthcare during a temporary stay in all EU countries.

Read more on how the EU helps to improve public health.

An inclusive labour market

Parliament proposed a set of measures to ensure people who have been ill can easily get back to work, while chronically ill or disabled workers can be better integrated in the labour market.
In 2019 MEPs also approved the European Accessibility Act to make many everyday products and services - such as smartphones, computers or ATMs - accessible to the elderly and to people with a disability in the EU.

Find out more

European Commission: reflection paper on the social dimension of Europe (26 April 2017)
Fact sheet: social and employment policy
Briefing: European Pillar of Social Rights
Podcast: EU Pillar of Social Rights