

Commission launches bid to make Europe social

By **ALEKSANDRA ERIKSSON**  

BRUSSELS, TODAY, 09:23

The European Commission unveiled on Wednesday (26 April) a proposal for work-life balance, which would help women to stay in the labour market even after they have families and would grant fathers 10 days of paid paternity leave.

Brussels also wants to strengthen the current right to four months of unpaid parental leave per child by suggesting it should be paid at sick-pay level, and that it can be used at any time before the child turns 12.

While many countries already have wider parental rights, roughly half of the member states don't offer paid parental leave at all. The commission also foresees that everyone should get the right to care, for instance for an elderly parent, for five days each year.

The commission would also enshrine those rights at EU level, at a time where Europe could be seeing the return of conservative values.

Commission vice-president Frans Timmermans, when introducing the proposal to members of the European Parliament, said he worried of a "cultural counter-revolution", where young women risked having less rights than their mothers.

The proposal was welcomed by a coalition of six NGOs including Coface Families Europe, the European Women's Lobby and Making Mothers Matter, who nevertheless regretted the proposal failed to protect women returning to work after leave from dismissal.

The draft bill was presented together with the European pillar of social rights, a flagship project of the commission aimed at reconnecting it with EU citizens.

They come at a moment where "Europe" has for many become synonymous with social dumping and austerity policies, and are aimed to change that image.

Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker said at a conference in January that this was the "last chance" for social Europe. Already in his first speech in office, in October 2014, he spoke of his wish for Europe to have a "triple-A on social issues", in reference to banking standards.

But many worried, on Wednesday, that the commission's pillar could be dead on arrival.

Rather than binding legislation, the commission took the unusual step of proposing the pillar in two forms: one commission recommendation; and one proposal for a proclamation that would be announced by the European Parliament and Council, the institution representing member states, before the end of the year.

Both outline principles, such as the right to life-long learning, protection against abrupt dismissal, flexible work regimes and fair wages that provide for a decent standard of living.

Proclamations are unusual in the EU world. The last one hails from 2000, and dealt with the launch of the European Charter of Human Rights.

This had some MEPs criticise the commission for not daring to go further than a list of nice words.

"The proposal for a social pillar disappointed us. There is a huge gap between the hopes you created and the proposal you unveiled," said Spanish green MEP Ernest Urtasun in a plenary debate.

"I fear you are giving in to the Council. You are terrified that the Council isn't going to push this through, so you don't even try."

But the method can be seen as a reaction to problems encountered by the EU executive with binding legislation on social policy, such as the revision of posted workers, which was launched last year and has bitterly divided member states. The Maltese presidency of the Council hopes to find a compromise in June, but the proposal seems to be stuck.

The fact that the commission is looking for its role on social policy was also suggested by the fact it also launched a reflection paper on the future of social policy in Europe on Wednesday.

Employment commissioner Marianne Thyssen told a press conference that member states had an interest in working together, because "social is on the top of mind of

people".

"This is what [people] expect us to do. People want upper convergence in Europe, not a downward spiral, there can be no doubt about it," she said, adding there would be more concrete proposals in the future.



New EU parliament coalitions get in shape

20. JAN, 09:04

Social-democrats and their allies scored a major win on Thursday with the adoption of a report on social rights. But questions remain on the parliament's power balance after the end of the left-right grand coalition.



FEATURE

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19. APR, 16:23

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MEPs set out to give posted workers equal pay

24. MAR, 08:50

A revision of the posted workers directive aims to make the single market fairer, but critics see efforts to root out "social dumping" as disguised protectionism.



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14. MAR, 12:44

The European Court of Justice ruled that internal company rules applying to all religious and political signs are not discriminatory.



EU foreign service should pay its interns, EU watchdog says

17. FEB, 10:13

Internships in the EU foreign service can help young people to build their career, so they should be open to anyone, not only those who can afford them, the EU ombudsman Emily O'Reilly said.



Dutch plan global fund for safe abortion

26. JAN, 09:29

The Dutch want to lead efforts to make up the shortfall in aid for safe abortions around the world, after Donald Trump announced the US would not fund such projects.