



Our Social Europe - Strong Together

Social justice in action within as well as between member states

Federal Labour Minister Hubertus Heil discussed ideas for a Social Europe during and after the crisis with high-ranking guests from Europe, the social partners, NGOs and associations as well as citizens during an interactive online conference.

On 16 September, Hubertus Heil, Germany's Federal Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, brought together guests from across Europe during an interactive, virtual event aimed at strengthening the social dimension of Europe. There was a lively discussion about how living conditions across the EU can be improved and more closely aligned and about how Europe's social and economic recovery can be combined.

For Hubertus Heil it is clear that we can only move Europe forward together if economic and social progress go hand in hand. It was this very notion of being a community of social welfare states that was characteristic of the EU and the bedrock of its economic strength. This especially meant ensuring fair wages. In the minister's view, people from different member states must not be played off against each other. There must not be any second-class workers - everybody must enjoy equal rights. Even persons who cannot work should also be able to lead secure and decent lives in the EU. This was the reason why minimum income protection systems in the different EU member states were also part of the efforts to combat poverty and social exclusion.

The conference began shortly after EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen had delivered her first "State of the Union" speech before the European Parliament.

This speech was one of the subjects during a panel with David Sassoli, the President of the European Parliament, Ana Mendes Godinho, the Portuguese Labour Minister, and Minister Heil. All three leaders agreed that the Commission President's speech was a positive message for Europe. Especially close attention was paid to the President's remarks on an EU framework for minimum wages that is now being awaited eagerly. The panel also agreed that the EU had shown more solidarity than in past crises, which was greeted as a sign of hope and renewal.

At the margins of the conference, Hubertus Heil said:

"It is perfect timing that the President of the EU Commission stressed during her speech today that she cares deeply about the protection of workers. As German Labour Minister and as the acting chair of the Council of EU employment and social policy ministers, I am delighted about President von der Leyen's commitment to an EU framework for minimum wages. The Commission President is right when she says that everybody in the EU should have access to minimum wages - either in the form

of collectively negotiated or statutory minimum wages. President von der Leyen can count on our full support for an ambitious proposal during our Presidency of the Council of the EU, since it is absolutely clear for me that poverty-proof and decent wages do not only make sense from a social but also from an economic standpoint. There is no doubt that strong social partners and collective agreements offer the best protection against indecent wages. This is why we are not just talking about common criteria for an EU framework for minimum wages, but also about the strengthening of social partnership.

Ahead of the conference, the social partners, civil society, researchers, stakeholders, multipliers as well as citizens had discussed key features of future-proof employment, the best ways of designing minimum income protection systems in the EU and the role of collective agreements and minimum wages. Other topics included the measures necessary to support young people and ways to ensure that there are no second-class workers, but that everybody can enjoy the same rights. Minister Heil firmly believes that for Europe's cohesion it is essential to not just talk to experts, but to engage in a dialogue with the social partners, civil society and citizens as well. For this reason, Minister Heil, the Romanian and Portuguese labour ministers and Nicolas Schmit, the EU Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, exchanged views directly with stakeholders from the workshops to wrap up the conference. The stakeholders had the opportunity to present their ideas and recommendations. Across the board, there was broad support for the plan of the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs to work for a smooth start of the proposal on an EU framework for minimum wages during Germany's Presidency of the Council of the EU. In addition, they equally supported the ministry's plans to advance the debate about crisis-proof minimum income protection systems, to enforce the rights of all workers and to prepare people for a changing world of work.

Hubertus Heil summed up the conference as follows:

"Today's discussions have shown the multitude of creative ideas across Europe. Our debate was not just inspiring but also encouraging and gives ground to be optimistic that we will make crucial progress on "Our Social Europe" in the months ahead. As the German Presidency of the Council of the EU, we stand ready to find solutions that EU member states can back. What is important now is that we work towards fair wages and social protection together, shape the new world of work together and in particular give young people the feeling that Europe is not just some promise for the future, but provides concrete prospects."