The social situation in the European Union

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report by Ilda FIGUEIREDO (GUE/NGL, PT) on the social situation in the EU. The report pointed out that, with disturbingly high unemployment levels affecting young people and women in particular, the EU still seemed far from attaining the goals it had set itself for the year 2010 under the Lisbon Strategy, i.e. an overall employment rate of 70% and an employment rate for women of 60%. Indeed, to reach these goals it would have to create over 22 million jobs in the next five years. The committee agreed with the Commission's analysis, in its 2004 report on the social situation in the EU, that unemployment is a major cause of social exclusion. It said that priority must be given to tackling this issue through a revision of existing economic and financial policies, especially the Stability Pact, the Lisbon Strategy, internal market policy and competition policy, and also when the broad economic policy guidelines are laid down at the Spring Summit. MEPs called for the creation of a "Pact for Development and Employment"aimed at achieving high employment and creating long-term quality jobs.

MEPs also urged that the planned services directive should be carefully examined in terms of the consequences it would have on the labour market and on the quality of jobs. They also listed what they saw as the key objectives for the new social policy agenda for 2006-2010, including measures in favour of stable employment and respect for workers' rights, gender equality, combating all forms of discrimination and "fair distribution of the wealth created so as to enhance the wellbeing of all, which presupposes publicly-run, universal welfare systems and guaranteed access for all to public services of quality, including health, education and housing". The list also included measures to protect the most vulnerable social groups, including children, the elderly and the disabled, and an education and training policy geared to the needs of the European economy. MEPs further emphasised the importance of lifelong learning, as both a "social necessity" and a "social right".

Lastly, in order to reduce disparities between the Member States and achieve real convergence, the report emphasised the need to reinforce the budget of the next financial perspective (2007-2013) and the Structural Fund, thereby reconciling two fundamental requirements: solidarity with the new Member States and support for the development of the current less-favoured regions.