



## **What remains of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion 2010?**

Statement of the German Federation of Trade Unions and the German Commission Justice and Peace

Shortly after the introduction of the Lisbon Treaty on 1.12.2009, the European Union announced the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion. Already since the beginnings of the Lisbon strategy in the year 2000 the governments committed to promote the elimination of poverty. Among others the Lisbon Treaty is based on the solidarity of member countries, not only in cases of natural disasters but also in crises caused by people.

Announcing the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion the European Union stressed a common responsibility for creating a socially just Europe. In the course of the year the topic actually appeared on the agenda of governments as well as civil society organizations. Public awareness of social issues in Europe was raised not only by numerous events and statements of various organizations but also by political actors who raised the issue. There are no indications so far as to how the European Year led to structural changes in the prevention and combating of poverty. In this regard, the German Federation of Trade Unions DGB and the German Commission Justice and Peace would like to name two focal points questioning the sustainability of the European Year.

The European Year of Mobility of Workers in 2006 highlights a contradiction in the European approach of poverty reduction that- until today- is not considered. The objective of the European Year of Mobility was to raise awareness for the rights of migrant workers and the recognition of mobility as an advantage and chance for the European working environment. Indeed, especially in 2007 the chance was taken by hundreds of thousands people from the new member states of the EU, mainly from Romania and Bulgaria, which are amongst the poorest member states. Many migrant workers worked under precarious employment conditions as seasonal or temporary workers, for example in construction. These workers saw mobility as a chance to improve the life of their families at home. This was **before** the financial and economic crisis.

Four years later at the beginning of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion the EU criticized that 16% of the EU-population live below the poverty line, this means that the income of 76 million people is lower than 60% of the average income in their country. Drastic consequences of the financial crisis for the real economy lead to the unemployment of hundreds of thousands of migrant workers. These people who took mobility as chance, according to the theme of 2006, now became unemployed, were left

with no social security and had to go back to their home countries like Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania.

The mere sequence of European Years with noble goals is insufficient. To avoid damages of credibility, the annual theme consequently has to be used to really improve the situation of the particular focus group. The migrant workers were severely hit by the financial and economic crisis because a legal and social security, as discussed in 2006, was not introduced or implemented. Most member states of the European Union didn't ratify for example, the UN-Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families. Until today there are no cross-border schemes for the social protection of migrant workers but beginnings only to coordinate these schemes. These schemes however, are valid only in the EU and it takes a huge effort to apply for social provisions. There is a lack of initiatives to support member states of the EU introducing livelihood securing minimum wages. With this it would be possible to reduce poverty and to prevent unfair competition in the employment market.

A critical review of the European Year of Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion points out that another very vulnerable group of workers will continue to face the risk of precarious conditions: the domestic workers in the EU, coming from EU-member states as well as neighboring countries to the richer countries in the EU.

This group of workers could be better protected if the above mentioned and 2006 discussed measures had not been failed to put into practice. Due to that there are worries that these workers - still after 2010 – will be vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion especially if the EU does not substantially support the international negotiations on protection of the rights of domestic workers.

In 2010 the International Labor Organisation started its negotiations for a convention on the protection of the rights of domestic workers. At the beginning of the negotiations it became obvious that the representatives of the European member states were struggling for a consolidated position on the contents and the binding nature of agreements, although they largely agree on the need of protecting these rights. There are distinct differences in national legislations but not enough knowledge about these differences. For the final negotiations in 2011 it is necessary for the governments of the member states to resolve these deficits in order to promote the adoption of a strong convention on the protection of the rights of domestic workers. But, above all, they have to credibly support necessary ratification processes in their own countries as to formulate a binding EU-directive. With that the EU can send a clear message against poverty and the social exclusion of a very vulnerable group. In most countries manifold forms of discrimination against domestic workers are prevalent. Not only do they face work based discrimination but there is also discrimination based on gender and on migration backgrounds.

With the end of this year's theme the fight against human rights violations, poverty and exclusion still needs to go on. The experiences of 2006 taught us what happens otherwise: Only to raise public awareness without accompanying political and legal actions is not

enough. Otherwise the raising awareness will turn into a farce and the ones believing in it will find multiple difficulties in times of crisis.

**DGB and Justice and Peace therefore request the Federal Government to take action and to exert its influence in Europe through:**

- **Ratification of the Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families;**
- **Implementation of real cross-border social security systems for migrant workers, which also support reintegration in their countries of origin;**
- **Introduction of minimum wages at the level of a living wage. Individual or collective agreements cannot exceed the minimum wages;**
- **And the support and implementation of international labor law agreements as for example the ILO-convention on Domestic Workers.**

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