WORKING YET POOR

This open access book explores the EU regulatory framework to measure in-work poverty and reduce its impact on different groups of workers in the labour market. Its innovative approach links the enhancement of social rights with the full realisation of EU citizenship entitlements and values.

For almost two decades, EU countries have experienced rampant inequalities as well as the varied spread of in-work poverty, both around Europe and within national labour markets. Without the realistic prospect of EU citizens earning a decent living, the substantive content of EU citizenship itself could be put in jeopardy.

Following an in-depth scrutiny of the main policy options at EU and national level to reduce the number of working poor, this invaluable resource provides a theoretical reflection on the role of legislation and socio-fiscal welfare in contemporary labour markets.
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Working Yet Poor

Challenges to EU Social Citizenship

Edited by

Luca Ratti
and
Paul Schoukens
FOREWORD: THE CHALLENGE OF COMBATING IN-WORK POVERTY

I am grateful to Luca Ratti and Paul Schoukens for providing me with an opportunity to explain why this book is important, and why it deserves to become an important source of inspiration for further initiatives to combat in-work poverty.

The European Union defines the working poor as people who are employed (having held a job for at least seven months during the reference year) but whose incomes are below 60 per cent of the national median equivalised disposable income.\(^1\) In 2017, the working poor in the European Union thus defined constituted 10 per cent of the active working population, up from 8 per cent 10 years before;\(^2\) by 2022, the latest year for which data are available, the figure for the EU-27 was 8.5 per cent of the employed population, with wide variations ranging from 14.3 per cent for Romania and 2.5 per cent in Finland.

In other terms, almost one in 10 workers in the EU are paid wages that do not protect from being at risk of poverty. The cost-of-living crisis only adds to the urgency of addressing this situation: while annual inflation reached its highest ever level in the EU in 2022, more than tripling to 9.2 per cent, wages lagged far behind, up just 4.4 per cent.

The authors set themselves the challenge of addressing the causes of this phenomenon, and of proposing solutions. The research presented in this book does not remain at this highly general level, however. Instead, it focuses on four groups that are particularly at risk – what the authors call ‘Vulnerable and Underrepresented Groups’. These are (1) low- or unskilled employees employed in low-wage sectors, who are disproportionately at risk of poverty despite having standard employment contracts; (2) self-employed, particularly bogus self-employed and solo (economically dependent) self-employed; (3) workers under non-standard employment contracts (including in particular temporary agency workers, part-time workers and workers with a fixed-term contract); and (4) casual and platform workers. This approach is particularly fruitful, because it allows the identification of factors explaining in-work poverty specific to each of these categories, which therefore may call for distinct regulatory or policy responses. For instance, the adoption of Directive (EU) 2022/2041 of 19 October 2022

\(^1\) Eurofound, *Working poor* (29 November 2022). The equivalised disposable income represents the amount of money that an individual or household earns after taxes and other deductions have been taken out, adjusted for the size and composition of the household.

\(^2\) Eurofound, *In-work poverty in the EU* (Eurofound, 2017) 5.
on adequate minimum wages in the European Union, despite its potentially significant contribution to protecting workers from in-work poverty, will provide little solace to platform workers misclassified as ‘self-employed’; and it will not provide temporary agency workers or workers on fixed-term contracts with the kind of long-term income security that they need to plan their lives and take control of their future: other regulatory initiatives are needed for these categories of workers.

At the same time, certain structural developments affect the world of work in general, and explain the persistence of in-work poverty in the EU. Globalisation has made the situation of the least qualified workers in rich countries more fragile, by weakening the bargaining position of unions faced with the threat of outsourcing production to low-wage jurisdictions. The automation of work, now magnified by the rise of artificial intelligence, threatens whole segments of the workforce, and workers who fear they may become redundant will easily be pressured into making concessions on wages. Globally, automation may lead to up to 890 million jobs being lost by 2030, and to 1.1 billion jobs, about a third of total employment, changing radically as individual tasks are automated, with the risk that workers unable to acquire new skills will be left behind. Technological advances also facilitate the outsourcing of services such as accounting, translation, editing, data entry, completing surveys, tagging photos or business consulting, to workers operating from countries where wages are low, and who can compete with workers in the EU with low levels of qualification: the average hourly wage of the workers on web-based platforms is US$3.4, and half of them earn less than US$2.1 per hour. In effect, such forms of outsourcing result in the export of labour without the migration of those providing it: it is as if the labour supply in rich countries suddenly expanded dramatically.

Labour law itself has not been immune from such pressures. Work has been made more flexible in a desperate quest to increase the rate of employment (the Europe 2020 target is that 75 of the working age population should be at work). This quest however has led not to a reduction of poverty, but instead to the

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3 Directive (EU) 2022/2041 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on adequate minimum wages in the European Union [2022] OJ L 275/33. Directive 2022/2041 provides that the EU Member States will set, and regularly update, minimum wages, based on four criteria: purchasing power; the general level of wages and their distribution; the growth rate of wages; and long-term national productivity levels and developments. The EU Member States are therefore expected to define minimum wage not only in absolute terms, based on cost-of-living, but also in relative terms, relying in that regard on reference values commonly used at international level such as 60 per cent of the gross median wage and 50 per cent of the gross average wage.


growth of precarious forms of employment. Corporate strategies associated with post-Fordist economic restructuring (externalising, downsizing, outsourcing and subcontracting) lead to what has been called ‘informalisation from above’: starting in the 1980s, production increasingly has been decentralised towards smaller-scale and more flexible economic units, with many more menial tasks (such as cleaning or transportation) being outsourced to sub-contractors, leading to the growth of non-standard or atypical jobs characterised by hourly wages and few benefits, or even piece-rate jobs with no benefits. In many non-standard forms of employment, working schedules are either unpredictable (permanently changing on short notice) or inflexible (not subject to negotiation), or both (with non-negotiable sudden changes). This worsens the impacts of poverty-induced time deficits: individuals facing such schedules cannot combine multiple jobs, especially when they commute long distances, nor perform other tasks such as taking care of other family members; and it is difficult for them to seek training to improve their qualifications. Poverty-induced time deficits perpetuate the cycle of poverty, as individuals have limited opportunities to improve their economic situation due to time constraints.

These trends are made worse by inter-jurisdictional competition within the EU. Member States’ choices in setting wages and levels of social contributions are still driven by the perception that any increase in wages or social contributions could negatively affect their external cost competitiveness and reduce their attractiveness to potential investors in the most labour-intensive segments of the industry, thereby resulting in increased unemployment. Yet there is little to no evidence of a negative impact of minimum wages on unemployment. Instead, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has shown that in fact minimum wages can contribute to higher labour productivity, both at the enterprise level and across the economy, which can in turn strengthen competitiveness. There is also evidence that, contrary to the fears expressed by certain conservative groups, the indexation of wages to the consumer price index (as has been the case for a number of years in Belgium, Cyprus and Luxembourg) will not lead to a wage-price spiral, threatening jobs. In fact, such indexation systems (the development of which is now encouraged by the 2022 directive on adequate minimum wages in the European Union) supports the purchasing power of the middle classes,

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13 Belgium and Cyprus rely on the national Consumer Price Index (CPI); in Luxembourg the Health Index is used, thus excluding alcohol, tobacco and petrol (but including heating fuel, gas and electricity).
improving the resilience of the economy in times of crisis. And comparative studies have shown that fears of a wage-price spiral are ill-founded, especially under circumstances of imported inflation.  

Finally, the failure to allow asylum-seekers or undocumented migrants access to regular employment may also lead to forms of exploitation that, again, will make the situation of workers across whole sectors, particularly construction and agriculture, more fragile. In 2012, the Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, François Crépeau, reported that during his official visit to Italy, he met with ‘numerous irregular migrants working in informal sectors, many of whom were being exploited by unscrupulous employers, who appeared to enjoy total impunity. Employers appear to exploit the fact of the migrants’ irregular status by requiring them to undertake strenuous physical labour for long hours, and often paid far below the minimum wages, or not at all’. This will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the situation of migrants in the EU. While the Employers’ Sanctions Directive prohibiting the employment of irregular migrants should allow the worst forms of exploitation to be combated, the implementation remains uneven across Member States, not least because the exploitation of undocumented migrant workers in certain sectors is seen as benefiting the local economy. Providing these migrants with access to regular employment would not only ensure a better protection against abuse, but it is also a requirement of international human rights law: in addition to the right to self-employment, which is guaranteed to all refugees under the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, any difference in treatment based on residency status in access to employment would require justification under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; indeed, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has specifically reminded the States parties to the Covenant that employment can be an ‘important channel for integration within the host country and will reduce the dependence of refugees or migrants on public support or private charity’.

Globalisation, automation, flexibilisation, casualisation, inter-jurisdictional competition, and finally, in certain sectors, exploitation of irregularly staying migrants: these structural factors matter. Contrary to what is assumed in certain

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14 J Alvarez et al, ‘Wage-Price Spirals: What is the Historical Evidence?’ IMF Working Paper 22/221 (2022) (based on a review of 79 episodes of ‘wage-price spirals’ in advanced economies between 1973 and 2017, and 100 episodes in the manufacturing sector using a narrower but more widely available wage concept). This conclusion is further supported by the International Monetary Fund’s 2022 World Economic Outlook, examining 22 situations in advanced economies over the past 50 years with conditions similar to 2021 when price inflation was rising (IMF, World Economic Outlook: Countering the Cost-of-Living Crisis (October 2022), ch 2).


neoclassical theories of the employment market, wages are not the result of supply and demand curves meeting at some equilibrium point. They are the result of a bargaining process, in which unions and employers each seek to coerce the other party into making certain concessions, in what Robert Lee Hale called the economy’s system of power.\textsuperscript{18} This is also why the growth of job guarantee schemes, as illustrated for instance by Territoires zero chômeurs longue durée in France (now covering 58 municipalities) or by the Kinofelis programme set up in Greece as part of the response to the debt crisis in 2011 (which offered eight months of employment to 45,000 participants by 2017),\textsuperscript{19} could be game-changers in the future. For workers facing exploitative employers, a job guarantee programme subsidised through the public purse may constitute a fall-back option, strengthening their bargaining position, and allowing them to claim a right to decent work – and if they are in informal work because of an unwillingness of the employer to declare them in order to circumvent protective legislation or to avoid paying social contributions, to seek formalisation. Where the employment provided under the job guarantee programme includes paid leave, pension contribution, health insurance and childcare subsidy, or where it pays a wage above the minimum wage, it raises the bar across the whole economy.\textsuperscript{20}

One final remark may be in order. When official statistics speak of one in 10 workers in the EU being at risk of poverty, they do not mean that all these workers face extreme material deprivation: the ‘at-risk-of-poverty’ measure is, for the most part, a measure of wage inequality. The discussion about in-work poverty therefore should not only be a discussion about the minimum wage corresponding to a living wage, but also a discussion about the fairness of wage scales.

This is also a requirement of human rights law. In addition to having a right to a ‘living wage’, workers have a right to ‘fair wages’.\textsuperscript{21} The orthodox interpretation of this requirement is that wages should reflect ‘not only the output of the work but also the responsibilities of the worker, the level of skill and education required to perform the work, the impact of the work on the health and safety of the worker, specific hardships related to the work and the impact on the worker’s personal and family life’.\textsuperscript{22} In practice however, the levels of wages are the result of bargaining processes in which most workers, or the unions representing them in collective bargaining, are in a weak position from which to negotiate better wages. This is the result of the constellation of structural factors described above. Only by strengthening unions and protecting the right to collective bargaining will it be possible to uphold the right to a fair remuneration.

\textsuperscript{18} See in particular Robert Lee Hale, ‘Coercion and Distribution in a Supposedly Non-Coercive State’ (1923) 38 Political Science Quarterly 470.
\textsuperscript{20} P Tcherneva, The Case for a Job Guarantee (Cambridge, Polity, 2020) 83.
\textsuperscript{21} International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Art 7(a)(i).
\textsuperscript{22} E/C.12/GC/23, para 10.
Another and more fundamental problem is that the bargaining position of workers depends in part on what the end purchaser of the good or service provided will pay. However, as illustrated by the case of unpaid care workers, the most important contributions of work to overall well-being are not necessarily in the added monetary value it creates. Workers performing essential functions on which society depends are typically underpaid, because their contributions are insufficiently valued, and because the services they provide have the nature of a public good, for which the beneficiaries are unwilling or unable to pay. These workers moreover provide services that serve communities, including people living in poverty, who cannot afford to pay for such services: as a result of how work is currently valued in the labour market, the more the work serves the needs of the poor, the less well it will be remunerated.

The low remuneration of workers providing care can also be attributed to the fact that many of their tasks were traditionally performed by women within households and communities, without remuneration; even once these tasks were paid for, the wages were set at a low level, reflecting such a lack of recognition of the value to society of the work of reproduction (as contrasted with production). The activities of domestic workers, for instance such as cooking, cleaning, washing and caregiving – are undervalued both because they are often considered ‘unproductive’ and because they have traditionally been assumed by women – whereas they are a valuable and necessary labour which the functioning of communities and entire economies depend on.

This should not be allowed to continue. In order to be ‘fair’, the remuneration should reflect not only the economic value created by the worker, but also the contribution to society of the work performed. Prospective workers otherwise will seek the kind of training, and workers will provide the goods and services, that serve not the needs of the community, and particularly those of low-income groups, but those of the most affluent only. Thus, instead of making phones that last for many years and can be easily repaired, engineers will plan their phones so that they will have to be replaced with an even smarter version within 20 months; instead of designing schemes to help people in poverty, economists will become

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23 UN doc A/68/293.
traders; instead of building low-cost social housing, architects will aim at building mansions for the ultra-rich; and so on. The result is not only that the incentives are distorted against serving the needs of the poorest groups within society, and that an enormous human potential is wasted while it could serve societal needs, it is also that, since goods or services for these groups are undersupplied, their prices may increase, resulting in an artificial scarcity.

To remedy this, work that is of higher societal value should be better remunerated. In a study on the jobs that the Covid-19 pandemic showed to be ‘essential’, the ILO found that ‘essential workers’ earn, on average, 26 per cent less than other workers, and that only two thirds of the gap could be explained by differences in education and experience. In other terms, the workers providing the most vital services to society, in areas such as food production and retail, healthcare, cleaning and sanitation, or transport, are underpaid.

This is not inevitable. States could draw up a list of goods and services the provision of which is essential and of high societal value, and ensure that the workers involved in such provision are paid fair wages (beyond the minimum wage allowing the meet basic needs); they could also, conversely, draw up a list of professions that are currently highly paid despite their negative externalities (such as those of traders encouraging speculation on financial markets, workers involved in the extraction of fossil energy, in pesticides production, in plastic production, or in the tobacco industry, or workers in the advertising industry), and cap high remunerations in those sectors. In order for these mandates to be economically viable in the private for-profit sector, tax incentives and subsidies could be provided, compensating for the increased costs of labour in the sectors that society seeks to support, while at the same time higher income taxes would penalise the excessively high remuneration of professions causing high negative externalities.

What is needed to combat in-work poverty is more political imagination, and audacity. I welcome this book as a major contribution to the discussion on why we still have almost 20 million workers at risk of poverty in the EU. I have no doubt that this comparative research will continue to influence debates in the next few years on what needs to be done to address it. The authors should be commended for providing us with the robust scientific basis on which these debates can now be grounded.

Olivier De Schutter

United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights

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