

Turin Forum on Social Rights in Europe

Turin, 18 March 2016

Opening speech by Piero Fassino, Mayor of Turin

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Thank you for coming here today. One year ago, the Council of Europe organised here in Turin a Conference devoted to the European Social Charter and to the need to relaunch it. The European Social Charter was signed in Turin on 18 October 1961. Since then, it has been one of the fundamental sources of law used to govern everyday life in democratic countries, especially in the 47 countries which make up the Council of Europe.

A year ago, while discussing and examining the key importance of the issues which the European Social Charter raises, in particular social rights, the decision was made to set up a forum, the Turin Forum, which is meeting today, to act as a permanent venue for reflecting on, developing and comparing such issues.

Therefore, we are here today to honour the commitment made a year ago. This commitment was supported yesterday by staging an Interparliamentary Conference, attended by the Chairs, or their representatives, of the social affairs committees of the 47 member states of the Council of Europe.

I would like to thank Gabriella Battaini Dragoni, Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe. I would like to extend a welcome from Thorbjorn Jagland, the Secretary General, to the Forum. I would also, of course, like to thank the Chair of the Italian Parliamentary Delegation to the Council of Europe, Michele Nicoletti, who gave a speech yesterday and will also take the floor today.

I would like to thank all the parliamentarians who attended the proceedings yesterday, a large number of whom are guests of today's Forum.

I would also like to give special thanks to Jean-Paul Fitoussi and Olivier De Schutter, who will deliver the keynote speeches, which will be followed by a debate.

What objective are we proposing to achieve with this Forum? We have just gone through several years of economic and social crisis which have been particularly tough. As we are aware, crisis periods are always times when rights, the enjoyment of rights and the protection of rights are at risk, or are likely to be less prevalent. During periods of economic and social crisis, jobs are less secure, as are incomes, while rights and safeguards are subject to uncertainty and precariousness. This is a paradoxical situation because logic would lead us to think that during periods of crisis, rights ought to be, if anything, reinforced as the demand for protection and support grows among those who are exposed to risk. However, we are well aware that the dynamics driving the world's development are not only based on logic. There are also much more complex dynamics which

control the economy, the social impacts of economic processes, individual and collective behaviour. Therefore, periods of economic and social crisis are times when safeguards and rights are at risk. This creates the need to use the relevant tools and make the political choices to avoid this risk and allow citizens instead to rely on safeguards, protection and support instruments geared to promoting the full enjoyment of social rights.

The fundamental importance of social rights is demonstrated by their presence in constitutions. Whether they are then put into practice is a different matter. But in terms of asserting rights, the Charter's principles are basically incorporated into all the constitutions of the democratic countries. This provides definite acknowledgement of the key importance of the Charter and of the rights featuring in it for our societies.

Whether these rights are viewed as ever more important also depends on the processes and paths of economic and civil growth which have developed in every society. Nowadays, people are much more aware of the social rights they have than in the past. We only need to think about how recently gender equality has been fully acknowledged and how this needs to be applied in practice in every social sphere.

We only need to think about the key place given in the everyday life of every community to child protection and its associated policies. Awareness has also increased about the guarantees which need to be in place in the employment sphere. We have all been better informed for some time of the need to at least protect the dignity of work, even in the new forms in which it is currently carried out, particularly involving greater mobility and flexibility. In other words, work is respectable when the psychological and physical integrity of the worker is respected, when that person's work is given professional recognition, protected by a contract and decently paid.

We also need to think about how the issue of multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-faith communities has been presented to us on the political agenda in recent years, and about how this issue has become a particularly urgent priority due to the influx of migrants, whether economic or fleeing from conflict, into our communities. All this highlights again the key importance of social rights, the need to guarantee them to everyone, as well as the Charter's vital importance as a tool of daily governance for tackling the daily issues encountered in the lives of our communities.

I have summarised the reasons why we felt this Forum to be extremely beneficial in terms of having a venue which will offer over time the opportunity to monitor the relationship between the economic and social dynamics which affect our continent and world, as well as the social rights which feature in the daily lives of our communities. We therefore have a forum where we can compare the various issues and experiences and use this also to produce proposals and reports which can reinforce and consolidate social rights. This is especially true at a time when the crisis which the world is going through, and which has been particularly tough in Europe for years, is not only undermining safeguards and rights, but is also forming, in the sections of public opinion most exposed to the risk, attitudes and tendencies which can easily be hijacked by people with populist inclinations, adopting introverted nationalist views or displaying selfish parochialism. These are all attitudes which are certainly prevalent and are widespread in various European countries. During

these years of crisis, the awareness of the fundamental importance of European integration to policies for protecting rights has significantly diminished among a section of the public.

On the other hand, there is a section of the public who have convinced themselves that if they shut themselves off from us and become withdrawn from us, they will have more chance of defending themselves. This is a fatal illusion. By making themselves smaller, they will just be smaller and will not defend themselves better. By shutting themselves off, they are only more withdrawn with regard to their own problems and contradictions. But this illusion is alive and well and is being encouraged. Therefore, the Charter needs to be relaunched, along with the enjoyment of its rights. This is a forward-looking, positive response to this issue.

This is why we gave our forum the title “Europe restarts in Turin”. It is precisely by restarting with a focus on the key importance of social rights and their confirmation that we can devise responses for our citizens, primarily for those who are most exposed to risk, which will dispel any populist illusions or desire to become withdrawn.

This is why we feel that the Forum is extremely relevant and linked to issues which we encounter in our daily lives. We are sure that these reflections will raise talking points which will be beneficial to our work.