Brief report of the EPSU/ETUI workshop on quality public services, gender equality, and the European Pillar of Social Rights February 22-23 2018, Brussels

Introduction
The aim of the workshop was to develop a better understanding of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and possible areas for EPSU actions. To recall, the EPSR sets out 20 principles in the form of rights, to be implemented by the EC and Member States, covering access to employment, working conditions, and social protection/essential services. A number of these deal with public services (see EPSU introductory ppt). The EPSR is put forward as a tool to rebalance European integration by developing a stronger social dimension. As such discussion on the EPSR should be seen in the context of the ‘future of Europe’ debate launched by President Juncker in 2017. In this debate a number of different scenarios with different degrees of social components (but not economic) are put forward.

Exchange with the ETUC/ETUI
Philippe Pochet Director of the ETUI, reminded that the development of social policy has not been a continuous process but subject to intermittent waves (see article in the EPSU workshop reading list). It is an open question as to whether the EPSR can provide the impetus for a new phase of social development. Both Philippe and Esther Lynch, confederal secretary at the ETUC responsible for the EPSR, thought that the 'social scoreboard' element of the EPSR would be one of the most tangible tools that would be developed from the EPSR. This would fit in with the notion of social policy as an accompaniment to economic policy (in this case the EU economic Semester), rather than a 'stand alone' priority. The scoreboard could however be helpful if supports investment in social development and social dialogue (for example sectoral collective agreements, transnational bargaining). Currently the EC is developing indicators to measure social progress in the Member States, to which the ETUC is contributing. To note, the Social Protection Committee, made up of Member States and the EC, is also developing social indicators, including on long-term care.

Work-life balance
The EC has (or will soon) propose a number of social policy initiatives linked to the EPSR (proposals for a directive on work-life balance, for a directive on transparency and predictability of working conditions, for a recommendation on social protection, to set up a European Labour Authority (ELA) and introduce a European social security number). A ‘social fairness’ package, expected on 13 March, will include more proposals / actions to implement the EPSR.

In working groups workshop participants reflected on what might be EPSU’s priorities in the EPSR. Work-life balance package is certainly one of these. Irma Krysiak, from the EC gave an overview (see ppt) of the package and of current discussions with Member States. Some points from discussion include:
- We should use positive language about caring (rather than describing it as a burden and saying women who have children carry a ‘penalty’)
- Investment is needed to develop quality childcare and eldercare services. This investment is a collective responsibility and needs to be sustainable.
- Collective bargaining and social dialogue is important to ensure decent working conditions and, e.g., to prevent work intensity pressures having a negative impact on the health of pregnant women and their babies.
- Member States should sanction employers more effectively when they discriminate against women. The EC should consider infringement proceedings.

The ETUI is financially supported by the European Union
Out of the different elements in the package, paternity leave is the key proposal that would support men have more contact with their children, as research shows there is a clear link with early contact.

Defining what is ‘minimum’ standards is not easy (e.g., longer leave at less income replacement or shorter leave at higher replacement income)? What is important is to have a mix of leave entitlements, working time flexibility over the life-course for men and women, and quality publicly financed/supported care services available to all.

Further lobbying of Member States is needed by EPSU and ETUC to secure support in Council for the EC’s proposal.

**Exchange with the EAPN**

The workshop also had an exchange with the EAPN (European Anti-Poverty Network). EAPN has done extensive work on the EPSR and Amana Ferro shared their experiences to date (see ppt). EAPN have identified a number of priority areas in the EPSR to address poverty, inequality and social exclusion. Amana reminded us that the debate between social and economic Europe is a false one: the EU Single Market’s four freedoms (free movement of capital, goods, services and workers) inevitably have social consequences. She pointed out the links between the EPSR and the EU2020 strategy, the United Nations SDGs (sustainable development goals) and the EU’s financial framework. As the ETUC and EPSU, EAPN want the implementation of the EPSR to be a clear priority for the next European Parliament and European Commission. The rise of extremist, anti-social parties in many Member States is in this respect very worrying.

**Concluding points and next steps**

Many questions on the EPSR remain open, but opportunities to strengthen workers’ rights and social dialogue, gender equality and access to quality public services should be seized. In working groups participants identified a number of points for further consideration:

- **How to build allies mobilise around the EPSR?** Key moments are the Bulgarian Presidency’s discussion on the work-life balance (May), the upcoming EP elections and renewal of the EC Commissioners. Who can we work with at national and EU level to ensure social candidate? EPSU will see with ETUC what might be done in relation to the work-life balance package and propose some actions (lobbying national Ministers).

- **How to bring Europe closer to people?** On many points we are critical of EU policies (austerity, liberalisation and PPPs, structural reforms to increase labour market flexibility, attacks on social dialogue / collective bargaining). We remain however strongly in favour of goals of European cooperation and social Europe (bringing together the peoples of Europe). Social and economic inequalities between and within countries must be addressed in the Single Market / economic integration is to be sustainable. ‘One way’ freedom of movement e.g. healthcare workers moving from eastern countries to western ones, risks to undermine convergence. The EPSR must play a role here in supporting balances social and economic development in all parts of Europe.

- **How to build and strengthen in particular social dialogue?** What issues would build more engagement at national level which then could feed the EU level? The scoreboard and other initiatives in the EPSR should support social partners and collective bargaining, especially at sectoral level. Other EU policies e.g. public procurement are also relevant.

A report of the workshop’s discussion will be circulated and an update will be given to the next EPSU Executive Committee. EPSU will seek further opportunities to influence the EPSR, in cooperation with the ETUC, employers, and civil society organisations including the EAPN.