

Demands for public and occupational welfare in contemporary political economies: A three-country comparison of public attitudes towards workers' social rights and responsibilities

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Abstract

The employment contract as a key – directly or indirectly – to social protection and to some extent also services is of growing importance. At the same time, it is common knowledge that labour markets are changing and wage and income inequalities are on the rise – albeit still different levels across Europe. Owing to economic globalisation but also the expansion of the service economy, we have seen a growing economic and social divide between workers in standard and so-called atypical or non-standard employment.

Although the spread of non-standard employment relationships quite clearly have implications for workers' employment conditions and their access to social protection, we have relatively little knowledge about how people think and reason about this trend. It is relevant to ask what ordinary people see as the most problematic aspects and what they worry about in this regard. The legitimacy of welfare reforms at least to some extent hinges on whether they address these concerns. Moreover, assessments of contemporary labour market and social policy reforms need to be informed by knowledge about what the kind of policy solutions people desire in response to the flexibility that is now expected of workers in many occupational sectors. We ask:

- What do ordinary people see as employer responsibilities and what do they expect of the state?
- In which ways does the trend of increasing labour market insecurity challenge existing ideals about access to social protection?

The paper aims to discuss these questions and thereby inform the broader ongoing debate about 'how much state intervention is necessary and desirable and priorities for welfare state reform'. This debate of course relate to the overarching question of what kind of 'recalibrated' welfare states we are likely to see in the future given profound structural pressures that are not only economic but also demographic and political.

Our approach is comparative, drawing primarily on qualitative data (from democratic forums and focus groups) collected in three longstanding and mature European welfare states – Germany, Norway and the United Kingdom – as part of the NORFACE project 'Welfare State Futures: Our Children's Europe' (WelfSoc). These countries are classical examples of different welfare state regimes or 'welfare mixes'.