

The battle for minimum wages in the EU has started in Brussels - again. On the one hand, the Nordic countries are fighting for their collective agreements. On the other EU Commission and poverty alleviators, who say that some EU countries have such low wages that not even full-time workers can live on them.

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BRUSSELS. Last year, when Ursula von der Leyen tried to persuade European politicians to stand behind her as new EU Commission President, she vowed to fight for a minimum wage for all EU employees. It was a promise that made Social Democrats, but also leftists, Greens and liberals throughout the Union cheered.

"It should pay off to work," von der Leyen said, pointing out that many Europeans do not get the economy together despite having full-time jobs.

With some kind of low-floor flooring in all EU countries, one would not only cushion the "brain drain" - that people with coveted professional skills move to countries that offer better wages - that many of the poorer EU countries today experience.

Wage dumping would also be prevented in an open, internal market where employers look for lower wages across borders when hiring people, the European Commission says.

But in the cheering chorus few - if any - Swedish, Danish and Finnish voices are heard. Just the idea that the EU should settle on wage issues causes the warning signals to sound loud in the Nordic EU countries, where wages are negotiated between trade unions and employers' organizations, without the involvement of even their own government.

The European Commission announced this week that it should contact trade unions and employers' organizations throughout the Union, to get a feel for how they adhere to EU minimum wage rules. The survey will lead to more concrete proposals later this year or next year.

"An EU framework for how to generate minimum wages can stave off a very destructive race to the bottom, for the price of labor," said EU Labor Commissioner Nicolas Schmit in Brussels.

Schmit emphasized that one does not want to nail a minimum wage in all EU countries - you are not entitled to that - but to make sure that all countries set reasonable criteria for how to calculate minimum wages.

"Workers must receive a fair wage, which allows a decent standard of living," Schmit said.

The complaints from the north did not wait:

"Today, the European Commission has presented a first initiative at EU-wide minimum wage levels. The Center Party is opposed to the idea of a comprehensive minimum wage. Issues related to wage formation and the Member States' legal traditions should be decided at home, not by the Brussels bureaucrats," wrote EU parliamentarian Abir Al-Sahlani (C) upset.

But this is far from the first time the European Commission has discussed the idea. Both 2007 and 2012, for example, openly advocated minimum wages throughout the EU.

Five years ago, the European Commission consulted trade unions and employers' organizations on minimum wages - that is, the kind of consultation that is now to be re-launched. As recently as three

years ago, the European Parliament adopted a resolution (non-binding) on the introduction of minimum wages.

The proposals and the Council Act have so far ended up in nothing. For it is the EU's 28 member states and the European Parliament in Brussels that club EU laws. The European Commission can only suggest them.

Opposition to EU law on minimum wages comes not only from the Nordic countries, but also from EU countries who either say they cannot afford to raise wages, or do not want to jeopardize the greatest benefit to their workers in the EU: that they are cheaper to hire .

This time, however, the European Commission has invested more political prestige into the issue, not least because two years ago the EU heads of state and government shook hands on the "social pillar" - an idea program for EU citizens' social rights, including at labor market.

- Since the EU has adopted the social pillar, it has been politically bound to address the designated areas, which include fair wages, says Anna Ryde, legal researcher and deputy director of the Swedish Institute for European Political Studies (SIEPS).

- The European Commission is using the rhetoric that the large pay gap in the EU is a problem and at the same time has promised that the EU will be close to its citizens - then something must be done about the problem too, Ryde continues.

However, the researcher believes that the European Commission will proceed more cautiously than many feared, for example by not proposing binding laws - directives in EU languages.

This is also what the Swedish Social Democrats in the European Parliament hope for:

- Both unions and employers agree that a directive would undermine our labor market model. Better then when making recommendations to all EU countries, says EU parliamentarian Johan Danielsson (S).

EU parliamentarian Sara Skyttedal (Kd) on Thursday announced that she has brought with her her entire political group EPP, which includes Christian Democrats and moderates from across the EU, only accepting recommendations, not directives.

Leo Williams, head of the European Anti-Poverty Network, however, sees binding laws as crucial.

- Minimum wages at EU level are important for all the countries where, unlike in Sweden and Denmark, where workers' unions can step in and push up wages in collective bargaining, they are not able to influence their wages. Countries where trade unions are weak, Williams explains to the SVD.

- The minimum wages are not at all a "race to the bottom", about pushing wages down to an absolute minimum level, but on the contrary that they want to raise wages in countries where they are too low to live, Williams continues.

In Bulgaria, a full-time worker earns a minimum of € 268 a month, compared to a Luxembourg worker who is guaranteed € 2071. Around 110 million EU citizens today are poor, or are balancing on the threshold of poverty.