# European deputies award themselves a generous Christmas bonus

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European parliamentary deputies awarded themselves a handsome Christmas bonus earlier this month. Members of the European parliament (MEPs) voted in favour of a 2 percent pay rise backdated to the middle of last year. In addition MEPS also agreed a 2.3 percent increase in their allowances. This means that all of the 736 deputies in the European parliament will receive a New Year's lump-sum gift of over £5,400 [US$8,378] in addition to their regular salaries and expenses.

The increase in pay and allowances raises the net personal income of each deputy in 2011 to more than £170,000. This total combines an annual salary for MEPs of £80,829, plus the sum of £90,876 in "daily subsistence" and "general expenditure" expenses. It means the daily allowance for MEPs will go up from €297 to €304. MEPS are not required to provide any receipts or proof of expenditure for their allowances. MEPs can of course earn far more than £170,000 and are entitled to draw additional wages from other sources of work such as consultancy, legal services, etc.

The proposal for the increase in pay and allowances was approved at a meeting of parliament's bureau in Strasbourg. The decision was agreed without any debate.

The pay rise was agreed by deputies at a time when savage austerity programs and wage cuts are being imposed by national parliaments across Europe. Wage reductions of between 5 and 20 percent for public service workers and civil servants already have been imposed in Ireland, Spain, Greece and in a number of eastern and central European states.

In a statement, the vice president of the European parliament, Diana Wallis, defended the provocative increase in allowances for MEPs. She declared that the rise was "justified", telling one web site, "I am aware that it may not be popular and that it is coming at what is a difficult time for many people. I do feel slightly uncomfortable but ... costs for a lot of things have gone up and you have to bear that in mind".

The increased allowance payment was also defended by one Labour MEP, Arlene McCarthy, who complained : "I have to pay more for my accommodation in Strasbourg and Brussels than I did a year ago, so it seems only reasonable that the allowance which covers goes up".

A critic of the pay increases, Sian Herbert, of the Open Europe pressure group, pointed to the growing gulf between the self-serving bureaucracy in Brussels and the vast majority of European citizens. Herbert commented on the bonuses: "The sheer amount of money on offer to MEPs increases the incentive to make as much out of the system as possible".

Official parliament administrators sought to deflect criticism over the pay award and declared that the increases were "routine" and "nothing out of the ordinary".

Perhaps salaries of over £14,000 per month, 2 percent-plus pay increases and a £5,400 Christmas bonus are "nothing out of the ordinary" for the fat cats in Brussels, but for those suffering from the austerity measures insisted upon by the European parliament the story is very different.

According to a recent survey by the European Commission (EC), 75 percent of European citizens are of the opinion that poverty has increased due to the recession, with a large proportion of the population struggling to pay their bills at the end of the month.

The survey reports that the growth of poverty is greater in those countries that have announced measures to cut public spending, such as Greece or Spain. Seventy-four percent of those Greeks surveyed complained of an increase in poverty, followed by 65

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percent of Romanians, 61 percent of Portuguese and 60 percent of Spaniards polled.

Other countries which have imposed less radical and more recent austerity programs, such as Germany, France or Italy, also registered marked increases in poverty. While MEPs with huge salaries complain about paying increased rents for their second apartments in Strasbourg and Brussels, the fact is that working class house owners and tenants are increasingly unable to pay the bills necessary to keep a roof over their heads.

Poverty is on the increase in Europe, and at the same time inequality is growing. A recent study by the EU statistics office, Eurostat, revealed that income and social inequalities between the 27 member nations of the group had worsened as a result of the recession. The study pointed out that per capita income of 49,100 euros in the continent's richest region, central London, is nearly eight time higher than the per capita income in Europe's most impoverished area, Severozapaden in northwest Bulgaria.

Growing poverty and increasing inequality and homelessness across the European continent: in the face of that, members of the European parliament have just awarded themselves a significant pay increase.

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