This chapter looks at how European social policy has evolved since the late 1950s. It begins by reflecting on the intergovernmental character of the policy in the early days, and on how the gradual introduction of qualified majority voting (QMV) and the widening scope of the policy allowed the European institutions and interest groups a greater say in the EU’s social dimension. The chapter also looks at the fight against regional disparities and (youth) unemployment in EU cohesion policy, including the European Social Fund (ESF). Focusing on newer developments, later sections chart the arrival of the open method of coordination (OMC), a non-regulatory approach to European policy-making in this field, and the social partnership—that is, the involvement of interest groups representing employers and labour in making European-level social policy. The chapter concludes by arguing that social regulation has become more difficult since the accession of a large number of Central and East European (CEE) states, and because of the effects of the financial and economic crisis.
21. The European Union’s Social Dimension