



# NEWS

EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR WORKERS' QUESTIONS • NO. 4 / 2011

## OVERVIEW

### ■ Interviews with Bartho Pronk and Piergiorgio Sciacqua



The new duo at the head of EZA – President Bartho Pronk and Co-President Piergiorgio Sciacqua – comment on the future challenges facing EZA, the Christian-social ethic in EZA, the importance of the European social dialogue, the euro crisis, the Europe 2020 Strategy, the future enlargement of the EU and the importance and opportunities of the work of EZA's networks and platforms *Pages 2 to 4*

### ■ The European Social Conference on the Europe 2020 strategy



The balance between European social and economic policy during the first European semester was the focus of the event last September, organised by ACW / VCWV - Ter Munk (Vlaams Centrum voor Werknemersvorming - Ter Munk) in Brussels *Page 5*

## EDITORIAL



*Dear Friends,*

*What causes us great concern is the shift, even distancing, that has become very evident in the latest crises away from principles that define our democratic order: freedom, equality and security. As citizens we are aware that freedom is not to be equated with "lack of restraint", but that reciprocal responsibility is the key element of the personal freedom worth aiming for. Nor must this principle be reversed when we deal with networks that seem overpowering. Here the concern to uphold our democratic structures is*

*palpable: the spiral of heavy public debts, debt extension and new loans makes the government dependent on faceless financial networks. There is this dependence on the one hand and on the other the mandate from the voters to take political decisions – how can this dilemma be solved as quickly as possible?*

*Paul Kirchhof, retired judge of the German Federal Constitutional Court, remarked: "The debt crisis can only be overcome if it becomes the 'hour of European unity.'" He counters the faceless financial networks with a transparent "network" with a political mandate: that of the 17 euro states. The governments must make wholesale course corrections – repair measures, which in my view include the announced financial transaction tax, are not enough.*

*Yours,  
Roswitha Gottbehüt  
Secretary General*

## A special look at the situation of young people

The situation of young people on the labour market got much worse as a result of the crisis, although this group was always very special and very much at risk of unemployment. For that reason EZA decided to put a special emphasis on youth and co-ordinate projects on youth unemployment.

Three seminars belong to the project. The first about "Opportunities for young people on the labour market" will take place in October, organized by KSI in Germany. The invited experts will present the opportunities of young people on the labour market in several European countries. This will allow the situation in different parts of Europe to be compared. The second seminar will deal with "Situation and problems of young workers on the labour market" and will be organised by the NHS Youth Committee in Croatia. It will serve as a platform to

discuss the situation and problems of young workers.

The third seminar is a youth conference organised by the Platform of Young Workers of EZA and held by EDS-FNS in Poland in November with the topic "Young workers participation – young European generation on the labour market, in trade unions and education". Three working groups will discuss another aspect of youth participation. And a sustainable employment strategy for young workers is to be drawn up. The conference will also be a place to present the results of a survey that EZA carried out among young trade unionists.

*Marta Jędrych ■*

## Pronk: Social dialogue is hugely important for European integration

Bartho Pronk, former Member of the European Parliament, was elected President of EZA in December 2010 and has held this office since 1 September 2011.

**Question:** *What are the future challenges for EZA?*

**Answer:** I personally feel that the biggest challenge for EZA is the impact of the crisis and everything associated with it, especially with regard to employment. Another key challenge is for our members to involve their members in a process which shows that more can be achieved when we work together than when we don't work together.

**Question:** *EZA represents 67 workers' organisations with a total of some eight million members in 24 European countries. These organisations' cultural backgrounds and focuses of attention are diverse. Against this background, what opportunities do you see for EZA's education and training work in the social dialogue?*

**Answer:** The cultural backgrounds are what make the work of EZA so interesting and important. What we do in our seminars is bring together and throw light on different perspectives of the same question. In that way EZA offers great opportunities to carry out better activities on national level as well. Firstly, because situations can be compared, and secondly because there are very clearly viewpoints that can be better understood in this process. I believe this is very important, especially nowadays when there is a great deal of talk about a crisis of civilisation.

**Question:** *EZA is a network of workers' organisations that are based on Christian-social values. What does the Christian-social aspect of EZA mean to you?*

**Answer:** The Christian social doctrine is a doctrine that has to be put into practice time and again. That happens in different ways in different epochs. I believe it is now a matter of great urgency to do so, because for instance the Internet has brought about major changes, e.g. young people read less than before. That is a



Bartho Pronk, President of EZA

huge change. Social conditions have changed as well. We cannot simply carry forward what applied in the 50s, 60s and 70s. We have to go back to our roots and then see what caused the problems we have today. And we can draw inspiration from Christian social doctrine, of that I am quite sure. And it is very important to do that. Of course, not everything that was done in the last 30 years is invalid, but some things have to be re-assessed. The situation has changed in such a way that we have to take a good look at it again.

**Question:** *How important do you think the European social dialogue is for European integration, particularly with regard to an economic and monetary union?*

**Answer:** The social dialogue is hugely important for European integration. Why? Economic integration is still a major part of European integration, and

that requires employers and workers. Although there were very many cultural differences in the past, ways were found to negotiate. And in times of crisis it is absolutely vital that on the one hand economic solutions are found to overcome the crisis but on the other hand social needs are also met. It happens to be the case, and we have seen this before, that every time one country is in crisis, the countries that seek a solution through social dialogue are more successful. It is always easy to say that the welfare state has to be abolished because it costs too much, but that's not the case. It ends up costing a great deal more than seeking a solution through social dialogue. After all, in the final reckoning what matters are people, not the economy. The economy must not be allowed to harm people.

**Question:** *What challenges does EZA face with regard to the euro crisis? What part can EZA play in finding a solution?*

**Answer:** The debt crisis has turned into a massive crisis. Something unheard of since the 1930s. It is not that we haven't had crises since then, but what both crises have in common is that the focus is on money/the financial system. I think it is very important for the EZA to become involved in this, from the social dialogue aspect as well. But it is also important to carry out a study, because so far there has been no comprehensive study. There is a lot of talk about countries that are in difficulty, such as Greece, but there are also countries that caused many of these problems, like the United States, and nobody mentions them at all. Everything has to be seen in context. But so far that has not been the case. Which is why it is also important to focus on this. In recent years we have forgotten how difficult these problems were, because they had not re-appeared since the 30s. And also what the potential solutions are.

**Question:** *EZA along with its member centres intends to work hard at achieving the aims of the Europe 2020 Strategy. In your opinion, what outcomes will we achieve as regards the issue of employment?*

**Answer:** There are two aims that are of special importance for us in the Europe 2020 Strategy: employment and poverty. A crisis is always difficult. Normally in a crisis the first thing that is saved is existing jobs. That usually results in a higher rate of unemployment. That is always the major problem. What should we do about it? We have to make employment the key issue again, we have to see what we can

do to improve unemployment, but we don't normally see the results of our efforts until after the crisis is over. We have to keep a special eye on young people, because it is usually they that find no work in times of crisis. It may be possible to keep existing jobs, but there are no jobs for young people. So a specific strategy has to be drawn up for them. What is odd about the current crisis is that it has hit employment less than previous crises. Of course there are huge differences between countries. There are countries in which unemployment is very high, but they are the exceptions to the rule. Generally speaking there has been only a very slight rise in the unemployment figures. That is the odd thing about the crisis.

At the same time they say the elderly ought to work for more and more years, and so we have to concern ourselves with the employment of the elderly as well. Because we know that as soon as the crisis is over it'll be easier for young people again but the elderly will still not find it any easier. The problem won't go away. That's what we have to think about as well.

Of course, poverty is a difficult issue in times of crisis. There is still a great deal of poverty in Europe. We also have a growing problem with the working poor. There are many jobs that do not pay enough to live on. Many people cannot make a living, like buy a house, because the banks are no longer certain that they can pay off the loan in their lifetime. There are so many problems involved. That's another issue we have to tackle.

**Question:** *In your opinion what is EZA's mission with regard to the future enlargement of the EU?*

**Answer:** The enlargement of the EU is a major success for EZA. We have members in every new EU member state. We already have members in Croatia, which is marvellous, of course. And they are all very much involved in EZA's work. We have to continue with this strategy, of course, and also see how the consequences of the crisis impact there. We have such good members there that I am convinced everything will work out well.

**Question:** *How important do you feel the work of EZA's networks and platforms is and what opportunities do you see for it in the future?*

**Answer:** We have one or two platforms and networks, which enable people doing similar work to exchange ideas and learn to understand one another. And since they do so against different socio-cultural backgrounds it is very interesting for them to exchange ideas and experience. I also think they can improve the quality of EZA's work, because a platform can apply different national approaches to a problem and come up with solutions that are relevant to more than one country. That is the advantage. ■

## Sciacqua: Developing the social dialogue is a historical duty of EZA

**Piergiorgio Sciacqua, President of the General Council of MCL (Movimento Cristiano Lavoratori) and long-standing Vice-President of EZA, has been Co-President of EZA since December 2010.**

**Question:** *What are the future challenges for EZA?*

**Answer:** EZA's work on the European level is becoming more and more complex: the weak European governance of the economy is jeopardising social equality and there is talk of a growing number of people living in poverty.

It continues to be the historical duty of EZA to develop the experience of social dialogue in every country in the EU.

**Question:** *EZA represents 67 workers' organisations with a total of some eight million members in 24 European countries. These organisations' cultural backgrounds and focuses of attention are*

*equally diverse. Against this background, what opportunities do you see for EZA's education and training work in the social dialogue?*

**Answer:** EZA has to gain an even stronger foothold in some countries of the European Union; for instance, we are not represented yet in Sweden and Finland, and we are still weak in other



Piergiorgio Sciacqua, Co-President of EZA

countries. Our cultural objective is a strong motive that obliges us to develop relations between workers' organisations through training that promotes social equality and brings workers closer to a new culture based on co-operation: we have to resist the temptations of "counterproductive representations", which unfortunately still define the different workers' and trade union movements.

**Question:** *EZA is a network of workers' organisations that are based on Christian-social values. What does the Christian-social aspect of EZA mean to you?*

**Answer:** EZA acknowledges the immense value of Christian anthropology and one can say that EZA originated from the social experience of enlightened Christian politicians.

We should never forget that man is at the heart of everything, and, as Pope Benedict XVI preaches, these are "non-negotiable values" upon which a new, greater social obligation for workers must be based.

**Question:** *How important do you think the European social dialogue is for European integration, particularly with regard to an economic and monetary union?*

**Answer:** Social dialogue is vital on the path to European integration, and we have seen in recent years how important its role is: it was a major factor on our way after the last great enlargement: the new member states of the European Union have benefited a great deal from our experiences with the social dialogue.

**Question:** *What challenges does EZA face with regard to the euro crisis? What part can EZA play in finding a solution?*

**Answer:** The euro crisis – especially this summer's crisis – has taught us that it is time to establish a "real European Union", one that covers finance, and set up a real economic democracy: it is not possible for EZA to be inactive in this matter: the economy is something that doesn't affect only "experts". EZA must increase its experience and apply the principles of greater involvement of workers in the development of the economy.

**Question:** *EZA along with its member centres intends to work hard at achieving the aims of the Europe 2020 Strategy. In your opinion, what outcomes will we achieve as regards the issue of employment?*

**Answer:** The 2020 Strategy is an ambitious project for the European Union. First, I wish that better results are achieved than with all previous strategies, which never fully realised the stated aims. I also think it is important to apply the strategy to work, to training and in combating poverty. The first draft lacked enough emphasis on the agricultural policy, which was then rectified. It is not possible to exclude agriculture from our European future.

**Question:** *In your opinion what is EZA's mission with regard to the future enlargement of the EU?*

**Answer:** We must not forget that we still have a huge black hole in Europe: the Balkans are still "a border" and we have to intensify our contacts with the workers' movements and promote encounters between many countries and the European Union. There is certainly still a long way to go, but we all have to work together to shorten it. EZA already has good contacts, thanks also to the experiences of MCL; we must develop our relations in training and culture.

**Question:** *How important do you feel the work of EZA's networks and platforms is and what opportunities do you see for it in the future?*

**Answer:** The work of our platforms is very important: they should not feel like foreign bodies, instead they must boost the spirit of co-operation with EZA and at the same time develop a new form of collaboration between the centres that represent key prospects for our future: EZA can no longer be the "driving force" behind everything, and that is why we call on the centres that share the same social experiences and values, and the modern forms of involvement in civil life, as they can promote social equality in Europe and the strength of a new citizenship. ■

## European Social Conference in Brussels: The "Europe 2020" Strategy – Balancing the EU social and economic policies during the first European semester



*Plenary session at the European Social Conference in Brussels on 19 and 20 September 2011*

The Europe 2020 strategy set the ambitious target of reducing the number of people living in poverty by 20 million, but it is hard to find how the actions taken at national level will make it real. On top of that, the austerity measures adopted in several countries against the crisis created side-effects further exacerbating the situation of people living in poverty and other vulnerable groups.

The Christian Workers movement in Wallonia and the Flemish organisation ACW undertook a broad process of consultation and reflection on the European policies against poverty with social partners and civil society, which resulted in a conference in September 2011 in Brussels to put across concrete messages and influence the next European political semester. The conference centred on the analysis of the first European semester and of the situation in different countries and focused on strategies for a more social Europe.

Four workshops were organised to give an insight into the national reform programmes (NRP) implementing the Europe 2020 strategy in different EU countries. Four national cases (Denmark, France, Poland, Italy), were put into context.

The participation of workers' associations and civil society organisations (CSOs) in the NRP process has been very poor. This

mainly ministerial process gave only a short time to react when the NRP was out.

Fintan Farrell, Director of the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN), claimed that if "we want a social Europe we cannot be absent from the economic discussion". The growth model should be challenged because it has so far proved to be inadequate and, all the more, the cause of increasing inequalities.

The EU has achieved a lot but the treaties seem to be unbalanced in favour of the liberal model. It is important to reverse the trend introducing reforms such as the creation of adequate minimum income, taxes on incomes and on financial speculation. The Europe 2020 strategy, implemented through the NRPs, is a key moment for the engagement and mobilisation of both social partners and civil society organisations.

Workers' associations can organise strong mobilisation in favour of a better social agenda. In doing so, they have the interest of forming wide alliances with civil society organisations and of finding common objectives to bring forward our social model.

*Sofie Put* ■

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