

OVERVIEW

■ EZA series of seminars on the “Europe 2020” strategy



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■ EZA special project “The Western Balkans”

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■ Completion of the EZA co-ordinated projects on the debt crisis



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EDITORIAL



Dear Friends,

In times of crisis the question that must be asked is to what extent there is understanding for other cultures when important political decisions are taken. Everybody should be aware that the diversity in Europe has to be equated with people’s identities that have been developing for centuries. That is why these identities are mirrored in the national political structures that have likewise developed over a long period of time. In these times of crisis the dilemma of national politicians is to firstly do the balancing act between one’s own identity and European pressure and secondly

to credibly impress on the citizen, one’s own voter, the necessity of the joint project EUROPE. “Election day is pay day”, and the citizen pays – as in the case of Italy in February 2013 – with provocative mistrust owing to a lack of understanding and guidance. It must therefore be the political players’ supreme task to overcome this deficit in Europe, if not as the number one priority (we scarcely have the time left) then at the same time as overcoming the euro crisis, so as to avoid encumbering the precious ‘identity and democracy’ axis that guarantees peace. One positive move for both would be the desperately needed creation of socially-compatible economic and broadly defined structures in the deficit countries, so as to become more competitive, to create badly needed jobs and to do away with the unbearable situation of the young unemployed. So today our thoughts are also with workers in Cyprus.

*Yours,
Roswitha Gottbehüt
Secretary-General*

EZA seminar on vocational training in Europe

Solid, modern, transparent and Europe-oriented vocational training is indispensable for young people – not just in times of high youth unemployment.

Yet quick action is needed now. This was one of the findings of the EZA seminar on “The role of the social partners in the successful shaping of vocational training with a view to combating youth unemployment and creating sustainable employment conditions in Europe”, held in Berlin from 28 February to 2 March 2013.

About 70 representatives of workers’ organisations from 19 countries gathered to discuss examples of implementing bilateral agreements, methods and

requirements of sustainable vocational training, and at the same time to analyse how youth unemployment can be combated and sustainable employment conditions created with vocational training in Europe.

The focus was on the successful training systems in Austria and Germany that are based on the ‘dual vocational training system’ that has been in place for many years, and on the bilateral agreements between Portugal, Spain, Italy, Greece, Slovakia, Latvia and Germany referred to above.

The seminar-goers called on EZA to address the issue further. Because of the diversity of the issue we refer to the **conclusions** of the seminar.

Contribute to good work in the environment, information, communication and care sectors from a workers' perspective

Reduce the number of people affected or at risk of poverty and social exclusion by at least 20 million: that is the ambitious target of the European Commission, which it formulated as part of its "Europe 2020" strategy. The fight against poverty and social exclusion is also a key issue for workers' organisations and plays an important role in social dialogue. Ten EZA member organisations from eight countries addressed this issue in eleven projects in the 2012/2013 training year. The participants tackled very different aspects in their individual seminars. The "Europe 2020" strategy itself was discussed, as were the global correlations between the financial crisis and poverty. The question of prospects and possibilities of combating poverty was addressed, as well as the role of those involved in combating poverty. Each project learned of the situation of the "working poor". As part of an academic project, a presentation was developed and used in the seminars on this topic in conjunction with HIVA, the Catholic University of Leuven's "Onderzoeksinstituut voor Arbeid en Samenleving" in Belgium. The presentation "Poverty despite work in Europe – challenges for workers' organisations" contains facts and figures on poverty and risks of poverty for workers, and has suggestions and ideas for the activities of workers' organisations. It became clear in the seminars that it is just as important to introduce a minimum wage across the board in Europe as to do away with precarious working conditions, which increase the risk of poverty and have a destabilising effect on existing permanent and full-time jobs. The seminars also established time and again that the financial crisis both increases the risk of poverty for workers and has a negative impact on employment. And competition in the growing low-earner labour market is becoming tougher and tougher. The problem is often that it is precisely in this segment that trade unions have a low profile: the indispensable strategy for the future is greater collaboration with other civil society organisations.

Once again, in this training year a topic from the "Europe 2020" strategy will gain a special place in the EZA work programme. There is to be another presenta-



Presentation by Stan De Spiegelaere from HIVA at the *Solidarność* opening seminar on "The Europe 2020 strategy and the struggle against workers' poverty and social exclusion: who are the winners and losers?" in Warsaw in April 2012

tion and an academic paper in conjunction with HIVA entitled "The Europe 2020 Strategy and the EU employment package: workers' organisations contribute to more, decent work". The idea is to accompany five focal projects carried out by EZA partners from Germany, Italy, Latvia, Portugal and Spain. Given the aim of promoting environment-specific jobs, employment in information and communication technology as well as in health and care services under the EU employment package, the question that arises from the workers' perspective is how to ensure that jobs in these sectors are designed in such a way that they can help combat poverty and represent decent work for the workers. Another question to be answered is what role workers' organisations have in this process.

The European Commission points out the special labour potential in three fast-growing future sectors with its employment package. It is a special challenge for workers' organisations to have a say in shaping quality work in these sectors. This applies primarily where the nature of the working conditions often makes it difficult for workers' organisations to gain a foothold, such as in the care sector, in which small and micro-firms often operate. It is also important to remain realistic and keep in mind that, for instance, jobs created in the environment

sector can perfectly well mean job losses in other sectors. Such upheavals also call for the involvement of workers' organisations in social dialogue. Corresponding recommendations for action from an academic viewpoint with a European approach should strengthen workers' organisations in social dialogue.

Strengthen workers' organisations for social dialogue in the Balkans



The Bulgarian trade union confederation Podkrepa organised one of the working groups in the Balkan special project. Panel [from left to right]: Oleg Chulev (Executive Director of the PODKREPA Labour Confederation), Alfred Gajdosik (FCG Federal Vice-Chairman and member of the Board of ÖGB), Vesselin Mitov (International Secretary of the PODKREPA Labour Confederation), Pierre-jean Coulon (International Secretary of CFTC)

Strengthen workers' organisations for social dialogue in the Balkans, that is the aim of EZA's current special programme. Organisations from EU countries have been working on this with partners from Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia since November 2011. EZA is adopting a procedure that was successfully applied in the run-up to the EU accession processes of the countries from Central and Eastern Europe in the period from 2004 to 2007.

After a stocktake of existing relations between EZA members and workers' organisations in the Balkans, the partners defined the content and organisation of education and training events. The focus was on questions that met the need of the partners in the Balkan region. Six training alliances were formed, each with between two and four partner organisations. They addressed many aspects of the social partners' activities. For instance, they tackled the increasingly precarious nature of working conditions, the shaping of social dialogue, the imparting of knowledge of how social dialogue operates in Europe with regard to a future membership of the candidate countries to date and the challenges of labour law and social legislation. Another aspect treated was the role of the trade unions them-

selves in relation to their own members, as collective bargaining partners and vis-à-vis society as a whole.

The upshot was that workers' organisations in the Balkans face multifaceted challenges with regard to social dialogue: Although social dialogue structures are in place, the arrangements and agreements made rarely acquire a binding effect; especially since workers' organisations' knowledge, positions and opinions are ignored by the other social partners. Using the trade union diversity in the region does little to benefit workers' rights and interests. And co-operation between trade unions and other civil society players is hard to establish. In addition, the weakness of the employers organisations is an impediment to effective social dialogue, which undoubtedly must be viewed as an indispensable component of the accession process. Experiences from the EU also show how important effective social dialogue is in overcoming crises and the advancement of the European society, politics and economy. That is why it seems essential for workers' organisations from the Balkan region applicant countries in particular to redefine their own role with regard to subsequently joining the EU and also take a critical/constructive, active part in the accession process; an additional bur-

den in view of the enormous tasks already on their plate.

The special programme is being continued in this education and training year. The plan is to carry on with and develop the training alliances. Previous meetings have been used to identify the priority issues, to bring the partner organisations from the Balkan region closer to the EZA network, and to strengthen the European perspective. This was also the aim of the Conference on Trade Union Co-operation in Europe (KGZE) in Vienna, where the development of social dialogue in the Balkans was discussed inter alia. The conference also reflected on how the exchange of experiences between East and West organised by EZA reinforced social dialogue before the accession of the former Eastern Bloc states.

There are huge challenges, especially in the worker and social policy in the Balkans: in employment policy, for instance, workers' organisations must have a say in the shaping of decent, permanent and well-paid work. In particular, they must commit themselves to better employment prospects for young people. Combating poverty is just as much a complex field of activity for trade unions as the fight against corruption. The long-term aim must be to ensure that workers and the disadvantaged also gain from joining the EU.

The EZA special project will not answer every question, but will certainly create many initiatives and ideas for an effective representation of workers' rights and interests in the Balkans and establish networks to accompany the EU enlargement process in the region on an ongoing basis.

Completion of the 2012/2013 co-ordinated projects on the debt crisis

Pointing up ways out of the debt crisis was the priority aim of the EZA co-ordinated projects, which were completed with the international working group meeting on “*The impact of the national debt crisis on the European workforce*” in Madrid from 15 - 17 February 2013. Besides the working group organised by CST and USO, in which every Spanish member centre, the “International Platform for Co-operation and Migration” (IPCM) and the “Union of Research Centres’ in the Mediterranean” (UCEM) were involved for the first time, the following events were also part of the project co-ordination: the seminar of experts organised by HIVA in January 2012 on the issue of “*The European social policy in connection with the financial crisis – money, ethics and the future of Europe*”, the 24th Conference for Trade Union Cooperation in Europe (KGZE) organised by ÖZA in conjunction with KOK and KAP in June 2012 on “*Europe in the debt crisis – What impact does national debt have on the social systems and the labour market? How can new “tax systems” recreate political room for manoeuvre?*” and the KAP seminar of October 2012 on “*The impact of national debt on social security and the labour market*”.

Shape social policy with European funding

The **European Social Fund (ESF)** is a key instrument for shaping labour/employment/social policy in many countries of the EU. It is used in many ways by the social partners for this purpose. There are at present evaluation processes underway throughout Europe to come up with findings for the next funding period 2014 - 2020. Assessments so far suggest that there will be major changes in structures, content and possibilities in the new ESF. That is why EZA would like to exchange and evaluate experiences of implementing ESF measures from the angle of workers’ organisations in a project in the new training year. The idea is to consider the preparation of ESF projects, the collaboration with those involved, and the running and debriefing of the projects. In particular the plan is to set up a network to enable those involved



Panel at the concluding working group of the series of seminars on the debt crisis in Madrid in February 2013 [from left to right]: José Luis Fernández Santillana (Officer for Institutional Relations and Communication of the Unión Sindical Obrera (USO) trade union), Bartho Pronk (President of EZA), Rafael Rodríguez Ponga (President of the Fundación Humanismo y Democracia H+D)

Because the situation in the labour markets has deteriorated continually since 2008 and national debt is increasing in many countries, the EZA member organisations’ focus is on overcoming the social consequences of the crisis. Parallel to the co-ordinated projects, an academic paper with short and long-term approaches to solving the problems was drawn up which discusses not only ethical aspects but also structural problems of the monetary union and, from the angle of workers’ organisations, takes a critical look at the Fiscal Pact and reforms so far to overcome the economic and debt crisis. At the same time it presents the key results of the co-ordination, such as the reform of

the European tax, banking and financial systems, the strengthening of European integration through institutional reforms, and the creation of decent jobs. The results and recommendations for action to be taken by the EZA member organisations will be published in early April in the concluding publication on the co-ordinated projects. **Michael Schwarz** ■

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EZA
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Questions
Johannes-Albers-Allee 2
53639 Königswinter
Tel. +49 - 22 23 - 29 98 - 0
Fax +49 - 22 23 - 29 98 - 22
E-mail: eza@eza.org
www.eza.org

Editorial team

Roswitha Gottbehüt (editor-in-chief),
Matthias Homey, Norbert Klein,
Victoria Znined

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HellaDesign, Emmendingen
E-mail: helladesign@web.de

Photos

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