



NEWS

EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR WORKERS' QUESTIONS • NO. 1 / 2015

OVERVIEW

■ Criteria for a successful social dialogue

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As the result of a research project in conjunction with the EZA, Jan Van Peteghem, senior researcher working for the HIVA, is finalizing a synthetic report on recent evolutions in social dialogue and possible prospects for the near future in Europe, which will be published later on this year. He gives three examples of how academic findings contradict standpoints upon which public opinion is generally based *Page 3*

■ EZA platforms and networks

**UNIÓN CENTROS ESTUDIOS
U C E M
MEDITERRÁNEO**

Unión de Centros de Estudios del Mediterráneo (Union of Mediterranean Research Centres, UCEM): aims, working method and demands *Page 4*

EDITORIAL



Dear Friends,

On 4 March the EZA celebrated its 30th birthday! 1985 was the year the Val Duchesse process of social dialogue was started, and committed Europeans of Christian-social persuasion recognised then the great opportunity to help this process along through education and training for the workers of Europe. This was a very good idea that many others pursued. The right people were in the right place: in the European Parliament, in the Commission and in the member states. The then President of the Commission Jacques Delors, who said that "the integration of Europe

without the workers can never result in real unity in Europe", and for instance the then Director of Directorate-General V, Jean Degimbe, who Delors commissioned to bring employers and workers together at a European table. We are still working closely together with Jean Degimbe as President of the Centre Européen du Travail. This is just one of many examples that show that the value of sustainability in the EZA network is "writ large".

The aim at the time was to make the limping process of integration more dynamic through business and social inputs. Today, 30 years later, the President of the Commission Jean-Claude Juncker is trying to do the same thing in an enlarged Europe: get to grips with European integration and the high unemployment rate with a stability and growth programme. He is aware of the importance of a properly functioning social dialogue on every level.

*Yours,
Roswitha Gottbehüt
Secretary-General*

In the spotlight: Marianne Thyssen, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility

Question: *In the academic year 2012/2013 the European Centre for Workers' Questions (EZA) in cooperation with HIVA (Onderzoeksinstituut voor Arbeid en Samenleving, Leuven), published a study on "Europe 2020 – in-work poverty. Challenges for workers' organisations". The focus was the fifth key target of the Europe 2020 strategy, at least 20 million fewer people in or at risk of poverty or social exclusion. One of the most important conclusions in the study is that fighting poverty is about making sure that work is worthwhile, so that people work for a decent income and can be guaran-*

teed a dignified standard of living. What are the main points for you, as the EU commissioner responsible, of a social Europe in which this is possible for every employee?

Answer: I agree with the conclusions of this report. In my view, ensuring decent and safe working conditions and equal opportunities for all in the labour market is of prime importance and one of my priorities. Social equity is also a particular ambition of mine. We are all aware that the employment and social situation continues to be a seri-

ous concern. The crisis has taken a heavy toll on the social conditions of European people, so during the next five years our policy will have to address these social consequences carefully. For me it is clear we need to keep working to reduce the rising trends in poverty and social exclusion.

In order to reverse the high levels of unemployment, my goal is to focus on people's skills and to promote apprenticeships and entrepreneurship, with a particular focus on the long-term unemployed and young people. We need further investment in people to better educate, train and activate Europeans for the labour market. The Juncker Commission's Investment Offensive will help make a real and substantial difference in these crucial areas. In addition we also need targeted action to help the long-term unemployed.

Question: *In the current EZA education and training programme, a lot of member centres are dealing with youth unemployment and are very concerned about the long-term consequences, for example with regard to the demographic development. Juncker's first priority was to create more jobs in Europe. With what measures do you intend to tackle youth unemployment in Europe?*

Answer: The Youth Guarantee is a major structural reform in the mid-to-longer term, aiming at addressing structural problems in which youth unemployment is often rooted, such as poor performance of educational systems or an insufficient use of apprenticeship schemes, among others.

Its proposal is very simple: all young people under 25 will get a quality offer of a job, apprenticeship, traineeship, or continued education within four months of leaving formal education or becoming unemployed.

For most member states, implementation of the Youth Guarantee requires in-depth structural reforms of training, job search and education systems to drastically improve the school-to-work transition and the employability of young people that cannot be delivered from one day to the next. We are working closely with member states to achieve a swift implementation of such structural reforms.

In addition, my ambition is to speed up the implementation of the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI). As you know, the YEI is the European funding instrument to reinforce and accelerate



Marianne Thyssen, European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility

measures to fight youth unemployment. But the implementation of this initiative in the member states has so far been slow. It has not yet met the initial expectations raised by the European Council when it was launched. That is why I intend to address a key issue to kick off actions on the ground, namely the lack of funding at national level. I am very determined to make this work.

Question: *Member centres from the EZA network are reporting that they have more and more problems in the social dialogue on the employee side. Many expect the Commission to do more than just praise social dialogue and to offer concrete support, on a national as well as European level. How are you going to support the social dialogue in concrete terms?*

Answer: In July 2014, when President Juncker spoke before the European Parliament he clearly expressed the political objective of relaunching social dialogue.

In a first meeting with European social partners in November 2014, Vice-President Dombrovskis and I reiterated the importance of social dialogue for the functioning of our Social Market Economy and the commitment to ensuring stronger involvement of the social partners.

This counts for EU economic governance, both at EU and at national level, for the better regulation agenda, and especially for the improvement of the EU's regulatory framework as indicated in the Commission's political guidelines focusing on growth, jobs, fairness and democratic change.

We will build on the elements of the Commission Work Programme, such as labour mobility, the Energy Union and the Digital Single Market Package. But this could also be complemented with elements from the work programme and the joint in-depth employment analysis which European social partners are autonomously preparing.

A high-level event scheduled for 5 March 2015, in the presence of President Juncker, should lead to a common understanding on how and in which areas the involvement of social partners can be significantly improved, in full respect of their autonomy.

Question: *Juncker has created new structures in the Commission. One of VP Dombrovskis' portfolios is social dialogue. How are you going to work together on areas that overlap?*

Answer: I believe the new structures created under the Juncker Commission will help to create synergies and avoid silo thinking. It is very important that we address the current challenges faced by Europe in a comprehensive manner, always looking at the big picture. That is exactly what this new structure is intended to achieve.

I am a team player, so for me working together with other colleagues comes naturally. So far, I have had great collaboration with Vice-President Dombrovskis in many areas and, especially, social dialogue. The joint event on 5 March is an example of such spirit. ■

Three myths on the effectiveness of employee voice

Jan Van Peteghem, senior researcher at the HIVA (Onderzoeksinstituut voor Arbeid en Samenleving), is finalizing a synthetic report on recent developments in social dialogue and possible prospects for the near future in Europe, which will be published later this year. It is the result of the research project "Conditions and criteria for a successful social dialogue in Europe from the point of view of workers' organisations" within the EZA educational programme 2014/2015.

Of late, the effectiveness of social dialogue has become an issue studied intensively by scholars around the world – a world that, up to this very moment, is only slowly recovering from the worldwide economic downturn that started in 2008. Gradually, a commonly shared view is taking shape on conditions that need to be fulfilled before one can speak of genuine communication between employers on the one hand, and workers and their representatives on the other, and this for in-company social dialogue as well as for its cross-company equivalents (i.e. social dialogue on a national, regional or sectoral level). In addition, a number of research findings call into question some statements that keep on circulating amongst the general public. This article provides some examples.

Myth no. 1: The decreasing membership of trade unions will inevitably weaken employee voice in the Western world

Union density has declined considerably in most advanced Western nations in the last few decades. The public generally considers this as a bad omen for the future of social dialogue, but analyses show that it is not so much individual membership but unions' collective power that matters. In nearly all countries, the coverage of collective bargaining agreements is considerably higher than the trade union density.

Indeed, one reason why employers and trade unions still enter into partnerships more often than not seems to be that they, aware of membership loss and the decentralisation of collective bargaining to company level, try to sustain their positions as important actors in society. This has led to a re-orientation of the employers' and trade unions' attention from the regulation of wages and working condi-

tions towards social and labour market policies – political areas from which they had, in many countries, previously been excluded. In general, one can conclude that institutions were found to be significantly more stable than union membership.

Myth no. 2: The weak level of social dialogue in Eastern European countries is due to their post-communist heritage

In the large majority of Eastern and Central European member states, social partners mostly find themselves in a rather weak position. It is often said that trade unions in these countries suffer a major legitimacy deficit: they are often seen as a mere continuation of their predecessors out of a not-too-distant past.

However, this description, credible as it may seem, does not explain the relative weakness of trade unions and employers' organisations in the "new" member states. Relatively soon after joining the European Union, many countries saw their domestic companies disappear and be replaced by Western European (and other) investments. First, it was low labour costs that provided the main incentive for Western businesses to set up operations in the East. Companies' efforts to pay workers as little as possible have not been counteracted by the reliance on labour as an important demand factor, for the simple reason that the workers in these countries are not expected to massively consume the goods manufactured: in most cases, the goods produced by foreign multinationals were intended for export.

Myth no. 3: The current trend towards direct communication between workers and their managers weakens the position of trade unions

Most employers now prefer a regime of individual contracts and direct forms of employee voice. Many companies seem to have switched from representative communication (i.e. communication with employees via their representatives, in most cases trade union representatives) to direct contacts.

One research project showed that, on the issue of occupational health & safety in the United Kingdom, direct methods of consultation are increasingly used in

companies, while the extent of representative forms of worker participation seems to have declined. However, these direct communication processes seem to be less successful in situations where significant change is required to stay or become competitive. In general, research shows that direct participation is more frequent in unionised settings and it works better in environments where trade unions are active.

Jan Van Peteghem ■

EZA's networks and platforms

Unión de Centros de Estudios del Mediterráneo (Union of Mediterranean Research Centres, UCEM)

Last year in Seville, UCEM (Unión de Centros de Estudios del Mediterráneo) organised an important working group on the issues of migration in the Mediterranean.

The daily emergency caused by the arrivals of boats along the Mediterranean coasts must not be seen as a phenomenon limited to Italy, Malta and Spain.

After the disintegration of Libya and the collapse of the Gaddafi regime, every day no matter what the weather conditions boatloads of people arrive, fleeing from poverty, war or despair and landing in Europe to seek safety.

Many of these unfortunate people disappear in the huge grave that is the Mediterranean, some arrive dead, as again in recent days, and others cram the emergency reception centres.

The European authorities have so far been unable to present a concerted plan for working out a solution. For this is no longer just a problem, it is now a real tragedy.

As Pope Francis already said: "We have fallen into the globalisation of indifference."

In collaboration with IPCM (International Platform for Cooperation and Migration) UCEM is currently drawing up a plan for co-ordinating new political guidelines on migration in the Mediterranean and calling on Europe to approve a European policy for controlling the borders, which also includes a plan for drawing up European political guidelines

aimed at helping to create conditions so that people never have to leave their native land. Anyone at risk of starving to death overcomes any and every obstacle, but still sets sail for distant shores! At present we are no longer able to comprehend where these desperate people are coming from and which war they are fleeing; for there are many wars in Africa no one has spoken of for years.

The EZA's Mediterranean centres from Cyprus to Portugal often meet to analyse these issues and investigate what opportunities there still are in the southern European labour market weakened by the crisis. The prospects of vocational training and a formal job are also being analysed, in the hope of at least contributing to a culture that pertains to the numerous stereotypes that so far have encompassed the image of migrants and refugees.

UCEM calls on the European institutions, that is the Parliament, the Commission with Jean-Claude Juncker as President, and Italy, to tackle these problems and come up with a new and effective European policy.

Without a European policy and without a strong agreement we will always put off every approach to finding solutions, and the everyday tragedies in the Mediterranean sea will eventually take up whole pages in the newspapers.

Piergiorgio Sciacqua ■



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