

Honorary doctorate for former EZA secretary-general

The former Secretary General of the European Centre for Workers' Questions (EZA), Roswitha Gottbehüt, was awarded an honorary doctorate by the Latvian Christian Academy on May 26, 2016 at a ceremony held in Jūrmala, Latvia.

The Rector of the Academy, Skaidrīte Gūtmane, underlined the importance of the personal commitment of Roswitha Gottbehüt for making the first contact with the Academy in 2004 and thanked her for the excellent cooperation of EZA in promoting social dialogue in Latvia.



From left to right: Joachim Herudek, former EZA Secretary General, Herbert Metzger, EZA Deputy President, Roswitha Gottbehüt, Bruno Machiels, Secretary of the European Platform for Social Integration, Pēteris Krīgers, chairman of the Latvian trade union confederation LBAS, Leo Pauwels, EZA Honorary President

EDITORIAL



Dear Friends,

The Euro 2016 Championship has the whole of Europe in its grip. With 24 teams competing, never before have so many countries taken part. Even though competitive rivalry is inherent in sport, more than anything it is the passion for the beauty of the game that currently unites many Europeans. In terms of the political development of Europe, though, we Europeans seem to have lost this passion completely. The debate about the "right" way out of the economic crisis and how to deal with the growing number of refugees splits the EU. Whilst inequality and

intolerance are on the increase, solidarity and assuming responsibility for all of it are on the decline. Once again the re-nationalisation of Europe is becoming one of its greatest risks. Brussels gives warnings and occasionally hands out yellow cards. The United Kingdom is the first member of the EU to walk off the pitch. It is indicative of the internal state of the Union that it recently took two high-profile non-Europeans to remind the EU of its global exemplary model function and responsibility. Pope Francis touched a sore point with his searching question "What has happened to you, the Europe of humanism, the champion of human rights, democracy and freedom?". US President Obama urged us Europeans to abandon the old mindset of "us" against "them", putting the blame for our problems on others. It is precisely this type of approach that we aimed to overcome with the EU. Let's not sit on the touchline! Let us boldly come up with new moves together for the idea of Europe to win!
Sigrid Schraml
Secretary General

Interview with Georges Dassis, President of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)

EZA: Georges Dassis, you were elected President of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) in 2015. How do you see this role and what plans do you have for the term of your office?

G. Dassis: The President of the EESC has two fundamental duties: first, within the Committee itself, to direct all efforts towards enabling the three groups that constitute it – employers, workers and various interests – to be best placed to reach a consensus: to have real clout vis-à-vis the institutions that take the decisions, the Committee's opinions must

combine as wide a range as possible of European civil society organisations. We must come up with opinions supported by a very solid majority if we want them to have some influence, and we always publish the result of the voting. The President's second duty is to be personally engaged in promoting the Committee itself and its opinions. According to our internal rules of procedure, once elected the President presents a "work programme". I myself drew mine up deliberately not giving it that title and practically excluding anything personal, apart from the introduction. I garnered



Georges Dassis

- Trade union activist in Greece from the age of 15
- Activist against the Regime of the Colonels in Greece (1967-1974)
- Permanent member of the national staff of the Fédération Générale du Travail de Belgique (FGTB) from 1976 to 1980
- Since 1981, representative of the General Federation of Greek Workers (GSEE) at the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC, formerly ICFTU) and the International Labour Office (ILO)
- Since 1982, member of the Executive Committee of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)
- Member of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) from 1981 to 1990 and from 2002
- President of the regional section of the EESC from 1986 to 1990
- Founder member of the GSEE's Institute of Labour (1990) and Secretary of International Relations
- President of the ECO section of the EESC from 2004 to 2008
- President of the EESC's workers' group from 2008 to 2015
- President of the EESC from 2015 to 2018

the gist of the content of opinions already voted on by the committee, recalling that this was what the Union ought to do, adding that it is the Committee itself and not myself that will determine its priorities during my term of office, depending on current events. It has done so: in particular we took unprecedented initiatives in the face of the refugee crisis, and we immediately launched a campaign to defend the free movement of people and goods, when we understood that Schengen was under attack.

At the same time, like any of his colleagues, the President can put forward ideas and win over his peers. My colleagues knew full well when electing me what I was

like and in which direction my proposals would go: I was President of the workers' group for three successive terms. I strive for a European Union with greater solidarity, one that is more social, closer to its citizens, because giving people another image of the European project is the only way to reverse the trend towards self-absorption and disintegration, which can only make things worse for us. Even peace, democracy and relative economic prosperity are no guarantees, especially in some EU countries. These are things we owe to the European project, and we have to uphold them by dialogue, day in day out. We also have to move forward without the risk of falling backwards.

EZA: If you had to assess the state of the European Union, what would you say? Both in general and with regard to economic and social issues?

G. Dassis: In a nutshell: I am extremely worried by what I see and hear. There is a tendency to question the European project itself, as if this were a solution to anything and as if there were nothing to preserve from the history of our continent. And there is even worse: people flaming xenophobia and racism and championing the return to borders, all the while refraining, of course, from specifying which freedoms they would abolish if they were ever in power.

Europe has mismanaged so many things really badly, particularly economic and social issues, as well as on the level of foreign policy, defence, energy etc., owing to a lack of courage, scope and solidarity. To cite one example, the crisis and its effects could have been much better tackled if deliberate measures had been taken straight away instead of taking successive, sometimes absurd half-measures. Does it make any sense for one state in the Union to lend money to another state in the Union at a disproportionately high rate of interest whilst financing itself much more cheaply? Does it make any sense to seek the maximum profit in such transactions? Let me make this clear: I'm making a plea for solidarity, not asking for charity. They are two different things. What we need more than anything is awareness of the true sense of the European project and its core objectives. They are enshrined in Articles 2 and 3 of the treaty, but unfortunately they are not read in schools, and it would seem some politicians haven't read them either. It is worth reading them, though, and they are not at all hard to read. In paragraph 3 of Article 3, the word "social" crops up five times in ten lines. That is what has to be put into practice, quickly - to enable people to re-identify with the project. I recall the time when practically nobody in the few states of the EU would contest the principle of an increasingly closer union. As for the nations surrounding the EU, they aspire to only one thing: to join the club, both for economic prosperity and for democratic stability. What is more, several of them were or have recently been under the yoke of one form or other of dictatorship.

That said, what is fundamental is that the European Union may not be perfect, but it is the greatest achievement the people

of Europe had in the 20th century and of course we must continue to act to improve it, because I cannot conceive a better future for our children.

EZA: In view of the challenges facing Europe at present, what part can the EESC play and what are the options with regard to the consultation on the pillar of social rights launched by the European Commission in March?

G. Dassis: Firstly, I'm delighted that the President of the Commission kept the promise he made me of officially consulting the EESC. Secondly, I welcome the Commission's courage: we had become unaccustomed to it taking initiatives and launching something purely social with such a clear title. I understand the European trade union movement's distrust, and it is evident that we have to make sure its content is good, but it is up to us come forward to make it happen. The Committee decided to make it a priority: we will dialogue directly in a plenary session with the President of the Commission, who agreed to come to the Committee before sending our opinion. We set up a working group of 21 advisers, which is very rare, and the role of rapporteur will be shared by the three chairs of our three groups, which is unique in our history and has a great symbolic value. We also decided to be innovative with the method: we will visit each of the 28 member states to gather on the spot the desiderata of the social partners and other civil society organisations. We will leave nothing to chance, so that the work we are going to do is worthy of what the Committee accomplished when it drew up the "Charter of Fundamental Rights" annexed to the Treaties.

EZA: How do you intend to position the EESC vis-à-vis the other European institutions during your term of office?

G. Dassis: The European Union did something unique, typically European, by setting up the Committee and making provision for it to be consulted by the major institutions, compulsorily on certain matters and optionally on others. This principle is nothing new: the ECSC treaty already provided for a consultative committee of social partners which is in a way a predecessor of the EESC (and which also integrated in the EESC when the ECSC Treaty expired in the shape of "Consultative Commission on Industrial

Change" (CCMI), which is one of the Committee's internal bodies). What is unique in Europe is that the employers, the workers and the other components of civil society are consulted together and must express themselves together. There is something profoundly democratic about the principle of setting up and financing within the institutions – even at minimal cost – a consultative body called on to issue critical opinions vis-à-vis the authorities. The EESC has a dual "added value": first, it enables points which civil society agrees on to be acknowledged; second, it also obliges the three groups to dialogue. The authors of the Treaty knew full well what they were doing by setting up the Committee, reflecting what was being done in some member states. They were right then and they are right now. More so than ever. They wanted a Europe with its states at peace, but they had realised that the economic and the social dimension were at the heart of that success and that civil society had to be officially involved in the project. And above all that civil society was not to be excluded from the project. "Positioning" the EESC vis-à-vis the other institutions is having it accomplish as well as possible the mission entrusted to it by the Treaties, quite simply. At the same time I call on the major institutions that consult us to signal to people that they have done so and, if possible, add that they followed our opinion, when they have the good sense to do so. So I call on the major institutions to give us a little publicity. I would like them to mention the "Economic and Social Committee" now and then in front of journalists, in their own interest. It will never detract from their prestige – quite the opposite – and will be a means of reassuring people, at least when they follow us. Even people who do not belong to a trade union know that trade unions often defend them. Many people will be reassured if told that what was decided was the subject of an agreement between employers and workers: they will see in it the voice of reason. Many will feel listened to if one adds to it socio-professional organisations and all manner of civil movements.

Interviewer: Victoria Znined ■

EZA-HIVA Study on Integration and Inclusion in the Labour Market

The chronically sick, elderly workers, young people and people with a migration background are particularly hard to integrate

A total of nine education and training projects were carried out on the theme of “Strategy Europe 2020: integration and inclusion in the labour market” in the past EZA education and training year under the academic supervision of the Catholic University of Leuven’s Research Institute for Work and Society (HIVA). The seminars addressed the employment chances of the low-qualified and those of elderly workers and those with special needs. It became clear that education and training were key to long-term integration in the labour market and that there have to be long-term jobs available that are adapted to the particular needs and can further develop the skills and abilities of those concerned. There were diverse reports primarily from Eastern Europe of conditions for funding being considerably tougher than in Western European countries.

Strategies for overcoming exclusion in the labour market were also addressed, especially in connection with crisis situations. It became clear over and over again that crises in general resulted inter alia in creeping and concealed exclusion, by higher quality employment being converted into lower quality jobs and employment.

Another issue discussed was how in-work poverty could be successfully overcome in local initiatives including employment, and which labour market policy approaches were conducive to this. What is called for more than anything is action geared to requirements and the intensive collaboration of all involved.

The value of social companies for integration and inclusion in the labour market was also analysed. Often there is no clear definition of what social companies are. Sometimes there is also a lack of a general legal framework and a clear differentiation between profit-oriented and not-for-profit companies.

Fundamental questions such as the responsibility and scope for action of workers’ organisations in shaping inclusive and integrative labour markets were also raised, and consideration was given to how the European economy would have to be structurally changed to enable

as many people as possible to have access to a decent labour market. In view of the risk of growing numbers of workers being permanently excluded from the labour market, consideration should be given to solidarity business approaches that no longer focus exclusively on growth, and also to new income models such as the introduction of an unconditional basic income for everyone.

In a concluding study HIVA drew together the essential facts on the topic from an academic viewpoint and added to them the results of this series of seminars. For instance, the study provided a general synopsis of the preconditions and requirements for inclusive labour markets, presented European policy approaches and strategies, and discussed corporate aspects in dealing with target group-oriented job diversity.

Another part addresses target groups requiring inclusion and integration. Terms are defined in each case, facts and data are supplied, causes and consequences of the weakness of the respective target group in the labour market are brought together.

According to HIVA’s findings, elderly workers and young people seeking work for the first time are finding it hard in today’s labour markets in Europe. This also applies to workers with a migration background, and members of ethnic minorities.

It is also difficult for people with disabilities to find a permanent foothold in the labour market. According to HIVA’s findings, it is particularly vital to pay attention to the increasingly important group of workers with chronic illnesses.

Besides numerous facts and overviews, the study also presents illustrated options for action on every target group for the various political levels, and makes recommendations for workers’ organisations on how they can be active in the social dialogue to shape the labour markets in Europe in a more inclusive and more integrative way in the future. The study comes out in the autumn.

Norbert Klein ■

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