

European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)*
Union of Industrial and Employers' Confederations of Europe (UNICE)
European Centre of Enterprises with Public Participation and
of Enterprises of General Economic Interest (CEEP)

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Joint contribution by the social partners to the Laeken European Council

1. Introduction

The conclusion of the 31 October 1991 agreement and its incorporation in articles 138 and 139 of the social chapter of the Treaty marked an essential step in development of the European social dialogue. Ten years later, and on the eve of the Laeken European Council, UNICE/UEAPME, CEEP and ETUC would like to reposition the role of the social partners in the light of the challenges posed by:

- the debate on Europe's future and governance,
- the future enlargement of the European Union to encompass the candidate countries in central, eastern and southern Europe,
- completion of economic and monetary union and the associated development of coordination of economic, employment and social policies.

Concerned to play their role to the full in tomorrow's Europe, ETUC, CEEP and UNICE/UEAPME believe it necessary to reaffirm:

- the specific role of the social partners,
- the distinction between bipartite social dialogue and tripartite concertation,
- the need better to articulate tripartite concertation around the different aspects of the Lisbon strategy,
- their wish to develop a work programme for a more autonomous social dialogue.

The European social partners will flesh out the avenues for reflection identified below with a view to making proposals during the Danish Presidency.

2. Specific role of the social partners in European governance

Last July the Commission published a white paper on European governance which highlights five principles (openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence) and proposes increased participation by the various players, and in particular civil society.

CEEP, UNICE/UEAPME and ETUC fully support the five principles proposed by the Commission. However, it is important during the implementation to fully take account of the specificities of the social dialogue. The nature of the responsibilities of the social partners, their legitimacy and their representativeness together with their capacity to negotiate agreements places the social dialogue in a special position.

In their capacity as European social partners, often underlined by the European Council and recognised by the Treaty, UNICE/UEAPME, CEEP and ETUC ask to be associated as observers with the Convention which will prepare the next Treaty revision and to be able, in due course, to express their point of view on the subjects which concern enterprises and workers.

3. Distinguish bipartite social dialogue from tripartite concertation

CEEP, UNICE/UEAPME and ETUC applaud the fact that incorporation of the essence of the provisions of the 31 October 1991 agreement in the Treaty has led to development of consultation of the European social partners by the European institutions and has created a contractual area which has already been given concrete form in three European framework agreements.

* with the Liaison Committee Eurocadres/CEC

Since 1991, the areas for concertation between the social partners and the European institutions have multiplied. In addition, the term “social dialogue” has progressively been used to designate any type of activity involving the social partners.

UNICE/UEAPME, CEEP and ETUC insist on the importance of making a clear distinction between three different types of activities involving the social partners:

- tripartite concertation to designate exchanges between the social partners and European public authorities,
- consultation of the social partners to designate the activities of advisory committees and official consultations in the spirit of article 137 of the Treaty,
- social dialogue to designate bipartite work by the social partners, whether or not prompted by the Commission’s official consultations based on article 137 and 138 of the Treaty.

This distinction should already be promoted in the accession candidate countries where the confusion between tripartite concertation and bipartite social dialogue is undermining development of autonomous social dialogue.

4. Articulate tripartite concertation on the Lisbon strategy in a single forum

New Community methods for policy action have developed over the last five years. Incorporation in the Treaty of the employment chapter and the resulting process further to the decisions of the Luxembourg European Council together with the Cardiff process on structural reform and the Cologne process for macro-economic dialogue, in particular with finance ministers and ECB, have led to varied and uneven venues and times for concertation.

In Lisbon, Heads of State and Government decided to bring together the whole approach to economic, structural and employment initiatives in the spring European Council.

Reform of the Standing Committee on Employment has not led to a similar integration of tripartite concertation. The Standing Committee on Employment does not meet the need for coherence and synergy between the various processes in which the social partners are involved.

ETUC, UNICE/UEAPME and CEEP propose that SCE be replaced by a tripartite concertation committee for growth and employment which would be the forum for concertation between the social partners and the public authorities on the overall European strategy defined in Lisbon.

In addition to its specific work on the broad economic policy guidelines or the employment guidelines and structural reforms, with the various formations of the Council concerned, this committee would examine the Community’s overall economic and social strategy ahead of the spring European Council.

UNICE/UEAPME, CEEP and ETUC will make specific proposals on how they believe its work should be organised.

5. Developing a work programme for a more autonomous social dialogue

The European social partners are extremely attached to the procedures laid down in articles 137 and 138 of the Treaty. They fully recognise the European Commission’s right of initiative and the essential role of the European institutions in development of a coherent European strategy for growth and employment.

While pursuing work in progress on lifelong learning and the negotiations opened recently on tele-working, ETUC, UNICE/UEAPME and CEEP are reflecting on the best way of developing a more autonomous social dialogue.

Conscious that development of the European social dialogue presupposes strong involvement of national employer and trade union leaders, CEEP, UNICE/UEAPME and ETUC will discuss what concrete measures should be taken to better organise the work of the social dialogue in a work programme, defined by a social dialogue summit.

This work programme would be built on a spectrum of diversified instruments (various types of European framework agreement, opinions, recommendations, statements, exchanges of experience, awareness-raising campaigns, open debates, etc.) and would comprise a balanced range of themes of common interest for employers and workers. Its implementation would presuppose regular social dialogue meetings and/or summits.

Although decided and implemented in complete autonomy, the social partners will be concerned that their work programme should make a useful contribution to European strategy for growth and employment as well as to preparing for enlargement of the European Union.

The European social partners draw the European public authorities' attention to the urgent need to develop, with the help of the European social partners, a genuinely integrated technical assistance programme for the social partners in the candidate countries in order to foster the development of strong and autonomous trade union and employer organisations capable of engaging fully in the European social dialogue as soon as their countries accede to the European Union.

On their side, ETUC, UNICE/UEAPME and CEEP will involve employer and trade union organisations in the candidate countries in preparation of the proposals they plan to present to the Council under the Danish Presidency.
