



SPEECH

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24 January 2008

JOINT PROJECT OF THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL PARTNERS: “SOCIAL PARTNERS’ PARTICIPATION IN THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL DIALOGUE: WHAT ARE THE SOCIAL PARTNERS’ NEEDS?”

Final conference on 23 and 24 January 2008

Panel with John Monks (ETUC), Andrea Benassi (UEAPME), Charles Nolda (CEEP), and Director General Nikolaus Van der Pas (EC)

“Improving the effectiveness of a European social dialogue with increased responsibility, membership and diversity”

**on 24 January from 11.30 to 12.30
International Trade Union House, Main Auditorium (Rogier)**

Speaking notes for Philippe de Buck

Introduction

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would first like to say that it is a rare pleasure for me to be able to address so many of you, employers and trade unions together, from, literally, the four corners of Europe.

The different steps of our social dialogue work

I am sure you have heard a great deal by now over the past day of what has been achieved in this project – so I try to avoid repetitions. This project, when it will soon be completed – **24 national seminars in 12 countries over 5 years between 2004 and 2009** – is a big achievement for the social partners, the European social dialogue, and for the enlarged Europe. And we hope that it has been as useful for you, the target countries, as it has been for us.

We are in a period when the European Union is growing. Not only growing, but also evolving. And the social partners, together, we are responding positively to ensure that the new countries, and those that will soon join, can not only influence the European

agenda, but also to implement our joint agreements and improve the effectiveness of their bipartite social dialogue mechanisms within national contexts.

And let me add that the European social dialogue is working very well. You are probably aware of the recently concluded **Joint Labour Market Analysis**. A complex exercise, but an extremely valuable one that clearly shows the shared understanding of our social and economic challenges, and of ways to tackle them.

Taking into account these challenges, the European social partners have agreed for the first time on political statements regarding **the reform of European labour markets**. We have strongly advocated an approach that supports the principles of **flexicurity** – a holistic mix of mutually reinforcing policy reforms to strengthen the functioning of labour markets. And this approach should be **underpinned by effective social dialogue** at national level.

Let me **focus specifically on the target countries** of this project.

Since the 1990's, the reunification of Europe has been high on the social partners' agenda. Since before 2004 as the new waves of enlargement began, we have focused our activities on:

- deepening our understanding of the realities of the new Member States and candidate countries,
- looking at what are the effects of EU accession in those countries,
- identifying the key economic and social issues for each country as seen through the eyes of the local social partners,
- and gaining direct experience of how local social partners approach and debate issues.

The underlying assumption of our work is that the target countries have challenges in common:

- They must perfect the functioning of either relatively small and insular or young market economies;
- At the same time, they also have to carry out the necessary readjustment linked to joining the European Union and implementing the legal acquis;
- And, like all European countries, they have to face up to the challenges of globalisation, technological change and demographic ageing.

However, we are also deeply aware that each country has its specificities.

What results were achieved through the project?

Firstly, it has been a **learning process**. The seminars organised in each country with participants from central organisations but also regional, sectoral and company representatives has been an opportunity to meet and discuss what the integration into the EU means for the companies of our member federations, on the employers' side.

National players explained the situation and specificities of their national economy and societies to the EU level social partners. EU social partners learned a lot from that. National social partners also since they got feedback on the differences or similarities that can exist between their own country and other participating countries.

A lot was learned about the differences between countries, regional differences within countries, the variety of reasons lying behind the existence of an informal economy, the specificities of bipartite and tripartite processes and their influence on some features in the economy or in relations between the social partners, etc.

This will enable the EU social partners to better understand and take account of the national concerns of the target countries when working in the EU social dialogue.

The project also **gave an opportunity to national social partners to have a discussion on the main obstacles facing their social dialogue**. In some cases, the seminars offered an opportunity to overcome difficulties in national social dialogue discussions by providing a forum for open discussions in a purely informal setting.

- In some countries the social dialogue is still perceived with a win/lose rather than win/win logic – and the culture of ‘positive partnerships’ is sometimes lacking. Trust and mutual respect need to be reinforced.
- Fragmentation and organisational pluralism make it difficult in some countries to present ‘national’ views on behalf of majority constituencies – and in some cases makes it difficult to identify who is your interlocutor or counterpart.
- It seems that in many countries the government is not convinced of the case for strong autonomous social dialogue. It is up to the social partners, together, to make their case.
- Lack of financial and human resources has been stated as a difficulty for shifting already scarce resources from the local to national to international level.

All of the above issues taken together can provide part of the reason why there are problems with expanding the membership base in some countries, and can create a vicious cycle.

The improvement of bipartite relations can go a long way in extinguishing such perceptions. On the **more positive side**, the project enabled us to identify that there is a prevalent will to work together and to improve relations between the social partners.

- There was overwhelming agreement that improving bipartite social dialogue can only result in reinforcing the legitimacy of social partners, not only vis-à-vis governments but also for potential members and also in relation to European issues.
- Common acknowledgement that there is rarely a one-size-fits-all solution.
- Identification of issues that social partners are willing to discuss is an important step in developing and nurturing less adversarial relations.



Conclusion

In the light of all these very positive experiences, we look forward to the next phase of the Integrated Programme of the EU social partners, that is scheduled to start in Autumn 2008.

You heard already yesterday a joint presentation by the European social partners of the tools we have developed to further assist you as far as we are able to from Brussels. These services are for you and this is what this project is all about – we also need to know what your evolving needs are as we will continue our joint activities and Resource Centres into 2009.

I would like to end by saying that reforms cannot be successful unless the Social Partners are heavily involved. Their contribution to the eventual successful implementation of the Lisbon Strategy is key and the social dialogue needs to have its rightful place at national level to carry out our joint goals.