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Brussels, July 1983

REVIEW OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOCIAL SITUATION IN THE COMMUNITY IN 1982 (1)

In 1982 the unemployment rate, which rose from 9.2% at the beginning of the year to 10.8% at its end, was a matter of primary concern for the Community institutions at policy level. Not only did the economic recovery fail to materialize, but the year closed with a sombre economic outlook and an unprecedented total of 12 million jobless.

Deindustrialization once more continued at a dangerous pace in certain sectors of activity and geographical areas, bringing with it the threat of economic retrogression and an increased danger of social unrest - especially in the worst-hit urban centres.

All this led the Commission - at the prompting of one of its Members, Mr Ivor Richard - to intensify its search for a coherent employment strategy.

The development of an employment strategy

For political leaders of all persuasions, besides the Commission and the Council, the employment problem is becoming a more and more overriding priority.

For its part, the European Council emphasized, in the conclusions to its meeting on 30 March 1982, the need to promote investment and combat unemployment, acknowledging that the growth of the latter was creating an intolerable situation. The whole of the year under review was in fact characterized by increasingly insistent demands for action on the employment front. Aside from the unceasing pressure on the authorities exerted by the workers' representatives - and on occasion by the workers themselves - these demands also found expression on the streets, accompanied by sporadic outbreaks of violence. As well as representing a gross waste of human resources and a source of hardship, unemployment accentuates the divisions within society, having a disproportionately severe impact on those groups already in the most vulnerable situation on the labour market : young people, women, the handicapped and older workers.

In the case of young people under 25 years of age, unemployment had reached a wholly unacceptable level in all Member States by late 1982. With more than 4 1/2 million young people unemployed - 1.7 million of them for more than 6 months - the risk of social marginalization for a large number has become excessive. Where this group is concerned, action to improve the employment situation must be immediate and specific. It must nevertheless form an integral part of a strategy taking account of all factors favourable to employment, as must the measures taken to benefit the unemployed in general.

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(1) Report on social developments, year 1982, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 1983.

In the context of this employment promotion strategy, the Commission deliberately laid the emphasis in 1982 on the revival of investment activity. In a communication to the European Council on 28 and 29 June 1982 analysing the decline in investment in the Community (1), and later in a communication to the Council on initiatives aimed at promoting investment (2), the Commission endeavoured to convince the Member States that any employment promotion strategy worthy of the name must include vigorous action to encourage investment.

However, the unprecedented gravity of the unemployment situation - the worst encountered in the post-war period - also calls for more specific measures. The following may be noted among those adopted in 1982 :

- the emphasis by the Commission on the search for new employment growth areas (including the small business sector and cooperatives);
- the efforts made to improve the organization of the labour market, including the reduction and reorganization of working time;
- new measures in the area of vocational training;
- the Commission's appeal for special measures to increase employment opportunities for young people.

On several of these points, the Commission obtained an undertaking in principle from the Council, which adopted a Resolution on Community action to combat unemployment (3) on 12 July 1982.

Employment, reform of the Social Fund and vocational training policies

On 15 October the Commission presented its opinion to the Council on the review of the Social Fund (4). The primary aim of this review is to enable the Fund, as a crucial instrument in Community action in the social sphere, to participate in a more dynamic and creative manner in improving the employment situation, and to establish closer coordination between the Fund and the various priorities in the area of employment and vocational training.

In the same month, the Commission also put before the Council a communication entitled "Vocational training policies in the European Communities in the 1980s" (5). This initiative focuses on three major priorities of common interest :

- the social and vocational preparation of young people for adult life;
- the implementation of training programmes aimed at guaranteeing women greater equality of opportunity;
- the planning and organization of training measures at local and regional level.

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(1) COM(82) 390 final, 16.6.1982
(2) COM(82) 641 final, 8.10.1982
(3) OJ C 186, 21.7.1982
(4) COM(82) 485 final, 8.10.1982
(5) COM(82) 637 final, 21.10.1982.

This ambitious programme should make it possible for Europeans with appropriate vocational training to take on a number of major challenges, including that of adapting to a rapid rate of economic and technological change of unprecedented scope. The programme is also intended to help people manage their own working lives with greater flexibility and to facilitate other changes in the organization of work.

Under this programme, a special place should be reserved for a guarantee of training and work experience for young people on completion of their statutory schooling. Under this guarantee (better known as "social guarantee") the Commission has sought to create a system providing for all young people who desire it :

- a full-time programme of social and vocational preparation for working life for an initial period of one year immediately following the end of their statutory schooling, and
- a right to the equivalent of another period of vocational training of one year's duration to be used on a full-time or part-time basis before the age of 25.

Furthermore, the Ministers for Education, at a meeting held on 24 May, adopted a resolution on the implementation of a second series of pilot schemes related to the transition from school to working life for the period 1983-86 (1).

Also, the Commission forwarded to the Council in June a communication on the new information technologies and vocational training (2).

The reduction and reorganization of working time

In December the Commission approved a memorandum on the reduction and reorganization of working time (3). In so doing, the Commission responded to the wishes and conclusions expressed by the Council of Ministers for Social Affairs on 27 May, the Joint Council on 16 November and the European Council on 3 and 4 December 1982. The memorandum sees the reduction and reorganization of working time as an instrument of economic and social policy.

Equal opportunities for men and women

With regard to women, the Commission took steps throughout 1982 to implement the various facets of the new Community action programme on the promotion of equal opportunities for women (4), which the Council adopted on 12 July 1982. The Commission's actions were taken in close collaboration with the Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (5). In addition, the Commission methodically sought out and rigorously proceeded against infringements by Member States of Community legislation of equal treatment between men and women in the social field.

Social Security

Although the phenomenon is not a new one, 1982 might have seemed to some the year the social security system was everywhere in a state of crisis.

Social security, defined as being the area covered by social insurance, including unemployment insurance, health services and family benefits, is in all Member States faced with difficult financial problems and has been so for many years.

The Commission has established that the various national systems today have a number of problems in common, particularly as regards budgetary constraints, and it has therefore concluded that the time has come to compare notes and to

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- (1) OJ C 193, 28.7.1982
 - (2) COM(82) 296 final, 3.6.1982
 - (3) COM(82) 809, 10.12.1982
 - (4) OJ C 22, 29.1.1982
 - (5) OJ L 20, 8.1.1982.

initiate an exchange of ideas on the search for practicable solutions. In its communication to the Council on the problems besetting social security (1), the Commission started from the apparently straightforward comment that "The slow-down in economic activity and the resultant rise in unemployment constitute the main and immediate reason for the difficulties facing social security".

The proposal for the so-called "Vredeling" Directive

On 14 December, the European Parliament - after lengthy discussions - approved the proposal for a directive on procedures for informing and consulting the employees of undertakings with complex structures, in particular transnational undertakings, subject to a number of amendments, and the Commission has meanwhile indicated how far it could go along with Parliament's proposals (2).

In the view of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), the amendments passed by the European Parliament so dilute the scope and effectiveness of the directive as to reduce it to a mere code of conduct, while the Union of Industries of the European Community (UNICE) has reiterated its root-and-branch opposition to the directive, the need for which, in its opinion, has never been conclusively proved.

Measures in the area of safety and health at work

The Commission has been able to complete a large number of the priority measures set out in the first action programme which were due to be taken before the end of 1982.

In line with the outline directive of 27 November 1980 on the protection of workers from the risks related to exposure to chemical, physical and biological agents at work (3), the Council gave its agreement on 27 May 1982 to the proposal for a directive on the protection of workers from the risks related to exposure to metallic lead and its ionic compounds at work (4). This directive contains a set of standards relating to the implementation of a system to monitor the atmosphere at the place of work and a system for both clinical and biological medical monitoring.

Applying the same outline directive, the Commission amended its proposal for a directive on the protection of workers from the risks related to exposure to asbestos (5), in so doing complying with the opinion delivered by the European Parliament. Following a discussion in the Council on 10 December 1982, there now exists a genuine prospect of agreement among the Member States on this directive, and the Commission therefore expects it to be adopted during 1983.

Mention should also be made of the presentation to the Council on 18 October 1982 of another proposal for a directive, this one on the protection of workers from noise at the place of work (6).

Accordingly, on 4 November 1982 the Commission put before the Council a draft resolution on a second programme of action on safety and health at work (7).

(1) COM(82) 716 final, 17.11.1982

(2) Statement by Mr Richard to the European Parliament on 17 November 1982
COM(82) 758 final, 17.11.1982

(3) OJ L 327, 3.12.1980

(4) OJ L 247, 23.8.1982

(5) OJ C 301, 18.11.1982

(6) OJ C 289, 5.11.1982

(7) OJ C 308, 25.11.1982.