

Week 30 March - 4 April

SUMMERTIME : Ten mark up same time

The ten Member States of the EEC moved on to summertime on March 29. This was the first time that the Ten took a simultaneous decision to advance their clocks by an hour. The harmonised advent of summertime does not mean, however, that the ten countries form a single time zone; the EEC is too large for that. Summertime or no summertime, when it is midday in Ireland or the United Kingdom, the clock will strike 1 p.m. in other EEC countries, excluding Greece where it will be 2 p.m. The European Commission has just submitted a draft directive to the EEC Council of Ministers, suggesting that, as of 1983, summertime should start on the last Sunday of March (or a week earlier if this is celebrated as Easter Sunday) and end on the second Sunday of October.

This harmonisation of summertime should make life easier, particularly in the transport and telecommunications sectors.

S U M M A R Y

- | | | |
|---|------|--|
| FINANCE | p. 2 | VAT and social security contributions |
| ENVIRONMENT | p. 3 | The dangers of being wasteful |
| TRANSPORTATION | p. 4 | A timetable for Europe's railways |
| IN BRIEF | p. 5 | . EEC signs new cocoa agreement
. The latest figures on pig-farming
. Solar energy for homes |
| <div data-bbox="148 1424 319 1492" style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px; display: inline-block;">CLOSE UP</div> | p. 6 | <u>Experiencing discrimination in paid employment</u>
Most European working women feel that they have not been the victim of discrimination in the working world they share with men. But is this reassuring analysis justified ? |

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FINANCE : VAT and social security contributions

Reduce social security payments and increase value-added taxes - that is the formula recommended by Daniel Vié, a French member of the European Parliament, to stimulate employment.

It was in a written question to the Commission (No. 1858/80) that Mr Vié recently offered this proposal. According to him, small and medium-sized companies are penalised as a result of the social security charges levied on them which represent a heavy burden on their wage and labour costs. However, smaller companies are precisely the ones which are more likely to hire new employees. But it will be these social security charges which will discourage them, Mr Vié believes.

Moreover, it is these same smaller firms which produce a large part of expendable consumer items, such as clothing, shoes and other similar goods, that are currently facing "dramatic competition from countries with much lower salaries and inexistent social security protection" meaning primarily countries in South East Asia.

The solution for Mr Vié would consist of transferring some of the social security levies to value-added tax. In this way, the countries exporting to the European Community would be paying, through the VAT applied on their goods, a part of the member countries' social security charges. Mr Vié also asked the Commission whether it had undertaken studies to determine more precisely the economic consequences of such a measure.

In the reply, Christopher Tugendhat, the member of the EEC Commission in charge of financial and tax matters, indicated that one of the departments of the Commission has just ordered such an enquiry into the connection between tax problems and social security. Mr Tugendhat acknowledged that the initial impact of social security charges paid by employers is to increase labour costs, which is a particular hardship to labour-intensive operations. Nevertheless, he estimated that the long-term consequences of these charges depend on the way the employers pass them on to salaries or prices.

In addition, the volume of social contributions in nearly all the member countries of the European Community is such that the shift towards VAT would cause a massive increase in this tax, which in turn would be translated into a significant increase of consumer prices.

Finally, Mr Tugendhat supplied some statistics that can give pause for reflection. In 1977 it turned out that all the Member States, except for Denmark and Ireland, received more revenue from social security charges than from VAT. In most countries, social charges represented between 13 and 18 percent of the gross national product while the VAT represented only between 5 and 8 percent of the GNP.

ENVIRONMENT : The dangers of being wasteful

An estimated 20 million tonnes of chemical wastes that are potentially harmful are discharged in the 10 member countries of the European Community annually.

In some cases, these waste products are tipped illegally at municipal dumps, where they mix with other chemicals present to produce lethal "cocktails". On at least one occasion in recent years the driver of the vehicle discharging such chemicals died after being overcome by the fumes of such a dangerous combination.

While not all such discharges are so dramatic, they still represent a serious problem for modern society which has become highly dependent on chemicals and which is also rapidly running out of dumping locations. The most logical solution to this difficulty is the construction of plants either to destroy or reprocess these chemical wastes. In some instances such plants can recycle the waste products into an economically useful substance. But the process can be both costly and dangerous and public authorities as well as commercial and industrial interests are paying closer attention to the maximum efficiency and safety they can obtain.

Recently, the European Commission, in collaboration with other expert groups, organised an important conference on the treatment or elimination of chemical wastes. This conference, attended by experts from local, national and European institutions as well as representatives of industry, was held in Copenhagen and hosted by the Danish Environment Minister Erik Holst. The main aim of the meeting was to serve as an information exchange for new techniques and ideas in the field of waste disposal and treatment. As part of this process, the participants were able to visit and learn about the collective plant set up for several Danish communes near Nyborg for the transport, treatment and elimination of such chemical wastes. The facility is considered one of the best in the European Community.

Another goal of the meeting was to assist the Commission in drawing up conclusions about the need for possible future legislation or other measures in this field.

For instance, the Commission has just indicated to Parliament that it feels that too much such waste is still being dumped at sea under the regulations of the 1972 Oslo and London Conventions and that it will seek to encourage Member States to take steps to gradually reduce this practice.

TRANSPORTATION : A timetable for Europe's railways

The important railway system which has served Europe so well for so many years is showing its age and some important decisions will have to be made soon about ways of improving it or letting it lapse still further.

The extensive system which is still one of the best in the world provides an invaluable service for passengers and for industries shipping their goods to distant points overland. Unlike the United States, where the train has gradually been eliminated as a means of passenger travel to be replaced by the private automobile, the long-distance bus service or airplane, the railway is an important means of transport for individuals as well as freight in Europe. In fact, the soaring cost of oil is increasing the cost of automobile and aircraft travel and discouraging their use. So the railway, which was once the symbol of the opening of the modern era, may again have a future.

But the fact remains that railways are making increasingly heavier demands on state resources to meet their financial losses. State payments to railway companies increased by about 60 percent, even after taking inflation into account, between 1973 and 1977 and now amounts to about £ 6.5 billion annually.

The past two decades have seen a decline in the market share of the railway and the market and revenue losses are expected to continue. For instance, over the 1965-76 period, the railway's share of land-based goods traffic fell from 31 to 19 percent with similar trends recorded in the passenger sector. But the railways remain an important transport and economic factor in the life of most European Community countries. They carried 3.3 billion passengers and 900 million tonnes of goods in 1978 and employed one million workers.

Nevertheless, the railway system may be at a crossroad and transport Ministers of the European Community met in Brussels recently to consider the role of the railroad in addition to and in relation to other modes of transportation.

After a lengthy discussion of a report prepared by the EC Commission on the need for a review and a new policy, they asked experts to make some specific proposals that the Ministers could decide upon at their next meeting. The question of railroads also came up frequently during discussions of priorities in the transport field in the next few years but also during a debate about a possible expansion of the number of licenses given by each Community country for long-distance road hauliers. A number of countries supported an increase in road traffic for freight, but two others insisted that no such increase should be made, at least not before some decisions had been made about the ways of encouraging and developing railway systems, which they feel represent a more efficient and economic prospect for the future in this period of energy crisis.

IN BRIEF ... IN BRIEF ... IN BRIEF ... IN BRIEF ... IN BRIEF ...TRADE : EEC signs new cocoa agreement

World trade in cocoa has been regulated by an agreement between cocoa-producing and consuming countries since 1975. Cocoa is an important source of revenue for a number of developing countries, particularly in the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries which are linked to the EEC through the Lomé Convention, and which provide about 60 % of world cocoa production. The 1975 agreement has just been renewed. It was signed in New York on March 30, 1981 in keeping with a "mixed formula" allowing the European Community to sign alongside its Member States. The same formula will be used in future for other international commodity agreements.

LIVESTOCK FARMING : The latest figures on pig-farming

Latest statistics published by the European Statistical Office indicate that Community pig production reached 121 million head in 1980. This represents a 0.8 % increase compared with 1979 figures when production was 5.4 % higher than in 1978. In terms of weight, these 121 million pigs mean about 10 million tonnes of pigmeat ... an impressive quantity of ham, bacon and pork chops for Europe's 260 million citizens !

The Community's breeding herd is on the increase; the increase in sows is most marked in the Netherlands (up 3.1%), Germany (+ 2.1 %) , and Belgium (+ 1.6 %); there has been a reduction, however, in Ireland, Denmark and France.

ENERGY : Solar energy for homes

As it has done regularly for the past two or three years, the European Commission has just issued tender notices for solar-energy projects. The new tender notices will permit the launching of new techniques aimed at improving solar-energy utilisation for heating and lighting purposes in housing units. The Community is expected to provide financial backing for a certain number of projects which will be chosen before July 1 next. The formal text of these tenders was published in the EEC's Official Journal N° C/69, dated March 28, 1981.

EXPERIENCING DISCRIMINATION IN PAID EMPLOYMENT

The task of those who devote their efforts to the struggle for equality at work between men and women is definitely not an easy one. A recent survey published by the European Commission reveals that, of the 30 million European women in paid employment, only 4 million had personally experienced discrimination and believed that women were at a disadvantage at their place of work compared with men. This applied to most aspects of employment - salary, access to jobs, promotion and training.

The vast majority of women who were questioned by the survey stressed that they were not aware of discrimination or differences between men and women at work.

Why are most women in paid employment not more conscious of their rights - and more militant? Commission experts stress that tradition plays a large part in convincing women that discrimination is almost a fact of life - an inconvenience they have to learn to live with.

The study, however, also reveals two important reasons for women's apparent lack of responsiveness to a crucial issue. For one thing, one-third of jobs held by women are in government service or public administration where there is less discrimination than in the private sector. Secondly, most women work in an "all-female" environment and because of this have no experience of - and perhaps even lack of understanding of - what it is like to be in competition with men in a working environment. It is clear that when this competitive atmosphere exists - and it does for more than half of all women in paid employment - awareness of discrimination is much more common. Such discrimination is most keenly felt as regards salary levels. Of every 100 women questioned by the survey, 24 felt that being a woman was a "disadvantage" in terms of salary levels and only 4 felt that it was an "advantage"; 62 % of the women recognised, however, that there was a "difference" in the salary given to men and women.

The Commission study also reveals a heightened level of awareness of discrimination in the sphere of promotion and its corollary, in-service training. 25 out of every 100 women questioned reported feeling at a disadvantage as regards promotion, and 15 felt discriminated against when it came to access to extra-professional training and education. Commission

experts point out that in the eyes of women actually faced with a situation of competition with men, inequality in the sphere of promotion is a more sensitive point than the disparity between salaries. This is essentially because, in many cases, promotion is a necessary step on the path towards reaching a higher salary level.

The study also destroys certain myths about working relationships between women. It points out, for instance, that despite well-known stereotypes, women in paid employment whose immediate superior is a woman are often less discriminated against than are other women whose boss is a man. This is particularly significant since today about 80 % of all women have a man as their immediate superior at work.

The vast majority of women in paid employment seem to be strongly involved in their work, notes the survey. Half of them are under 35 years old, and 86 % of them had finished full-time education before the age of 20. Two-thirds of women who have no special qualifications were in paid employment from the age of 16.

Excluding legal maternity leave, 62 % of women in paid employment have never voluntarily stopped work. However, one woman in five is affected by unemployment, and this is particularly so among young women.

65 % of Europe's working women are either married or living as married and working in addition to their spouses or partners.

The survey also highlights certain national differences in Member States' attitude to women in paid employment. British women in paid employment feel the least disadvantaged because of their sex. Indeed, many of them are convinced that where they work, they are at an advantage in terms of getting employment and in relation to retirement. In complete contrast, German women in paid employment show a much more marked feeling of being at a disadvantage as women where they work.

France is the only country where the balance of opinion is negative concerning getting employment. In the Netherlands, women feel discriminated against as regards taxes, and in Ireland difficulties are recognised as regards access to jobs.

The study concludes that in Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, feelings of discrimination against women are above the European average. The three countries where discrimination is less obviously felt are Denmark, the United Kingdom and Belgium.