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UNEMPLOYMENT: A semi-permanent condition for one jobless out of two

The European Commission's proposal to the Twelve for reducing long-term unemployment from 50% to 30% of the total over three years.

More than half the jobless in the 12-nation European Community have been on the dole for a year or more. Long-term unemployment is hitting the young harder than their elders, relatively speaking, and it is continuing to rise in most Community countries. Some of the long-term unemployed have already been aided by the Community. The European Commission announced recently that it is going both to increase this aid and ask the Twelve to do more to enable them to find jobs.

In 1985 over 52% of the 16m. then unemployed in the 12-nation Community (they are 16.3 m. today) had been jobless for a year or more. But in several countries even this high proportion has been exceeded: the long-term unemployed accounted for over 68% of the total in Belgium, over 63% in Italy and 62% in Ireland.

The under-25s accounted for nearly 38% of total long-term unemployed in the 12-nation EC in 1985. They also accounted for nearly 46% of those unemployed for less than a year - and for only 17% of those with jobs. In Italy over 60% of the long-term unemployed were under 25 years of age and the proportion was close to 50% in Portugal and France.

In 1986 the European Social Fund devoted 25% of its resources to meeting long-term unemployment; this year the European Commission plans an increase of 15%, most of which will be spent on the over-25s, who last year received less than 8% of the total.

Last year half the sums devoted by the Social Fund to solving long-term unemployment went to payments to firms taking on additional staff. The balance was used to provide training.

The measures taken by governments at the national level to fight long-term unemployment are insufficient, according to the European Commission. To encourage more effective action at both the national and Community level the Commission has set a specific target: the reduction of long-term unemployment from its present level of 50% of total unemployment to 30% between now and 1990.

The Commission also believes that all who are jobless for more than a year must be guaranteed aid tailored to meet their individual needs.

TRANSPORT: A Europe without frontiers is not the Far West

The European Parliament proposes measures aimed at forestalling attacks on lorries and reducing the risks for road hauliers.

Even as the 12-nation European Community prepares to abolish its internal frontiers for 1992, and to let computers handle all import formalities, lorries are being hijacked on European roads - much as stage coaches were once held up in the American Far West. A resolution which the European Parliament adopted last month contains a series of measures which offer drivers a minimum of protection and reduce losses in case of an attack.

To the lorries overturned by angry French farmers, because they were carrying Italian wine, British sheep, Dutch pigs and Spanish fruit, must be added those hijacked by "professional" thieves.

In its resolution the European Parliament condemns "individuals and groups attempting to exert pressure on their national authorities or the governments of other States by attacking lorries and destroying their loads". It takes the view that such actions hamper the creation of a single internal market.

In order to forestall attacks, governments of the Twelve should guarantee hauliers safe routes, in Parliament's view. It also favours a network of guarded parking areas in transport centres, and calls on national authorities to instruct hauliers to group their vehicles in situations of danger. Lorry manufacturers should also be encouraged to equip their vehicles with additional security systems.

Given the absence of European statistics on lorry hijackings, Parliament has asked the European Commission to collect them. The Euro-MPs have also called for cooperation between the governments and the police of the 12 member states to combat vandalism and organized hijacking.

They also want a Community regulation setting the terms of insurance policies and indemnification for haulage companies and their drivers, as well as the client or owner of the stolen or destroyed goods. They maintain that VAT should not be claimed on such goods; in some countries, and Italy in particular, the haulier must pay VAT on a load which no longer exists.

ENVIRONMENT: The pearl mussel is threatened with extinction

Euro-MPs come to the defense of a misunderstood but useful species.

For centuries fresh water pearl mussels have enriched the jewels of the crowned heads of Europe. Today they could serve as an inexpensive natural indicator of the quality of water ... provided they are allowed to live. For pearl mussels are a threatened species, a fact which has led the European Parliament's Environment Committee to demand that their habitat be designated protected sites and fishing be severely controlled.

Pearl mussels were widely distributed in the rivers and streams of numerous parts of Europe in the last century. Today Scotland is the only part of the 12-nation European Community in which these mussels, which are unlike others, can exist in safety, as the Committee's rapporteur, Alexander Sherlock, has pointed out.

They will have soon disappeared from Ireland and southern Germany; only a few varieties are still to be found in France, Luxembourg and the Spanish Pyrenees. Unlimited fishing and pollution have led to their disappearance.

The mussels in Scotland are threatened mainly by unrestricted fishing, while their cousins elsewhere in Europe are being wiped out because of the sewage and waste water from tanneries and paper mills which are being discharged into rivers, as well as the use of intensive agricultural techniques.

Pearl mussels live 50 to 60 years on average, although some have lived for 80 - even 100 - years. Only 1% contain a pearl, a fact which has not discouraged fishermen. The Euro-MPs are not asking that all Community countries follow the example of Germany, which has banned fishing of pearl mussels. But they do favour restrictions, to ensure the species' survival.

Research has shown that the presence of pearl mussels in rivers and streams is a good indication of the absence of pollution; the creatures in fact appear much more demanding than the Community when it comes to cleanliness of fresh water. Mr Sherlock and his colleagues believe that the introduction of pearl mussels into waters that have been cleaned up would show, at very little cost, if they remained clear.

UNEMPLOYMENT: 400,000 fewer in April ...

but 1.4% more in a year.

There were 16.3m. registered unemployed in the 12-nation European Community at the end of April, some 433,000 fewer than in March. Much of the decline was due to seasonal factors, according to the experts at Eurostat, the Community's statistical office. Even so, this was the sharpest fall since 1980 for this time of the year, they noted.

Are there grounds for optimism here? All Community countries recorded a fall in unemployment in April, with the exception of Italy and Ireland, where there was a slight rise. What is more, both male and female unemployment fell, except in Spain.

However, the total number of jobless rose 1.4% in a year for the Community as a whole. While male unemployment fell 1.2%, female unemployment rose 5%.

Some countries escaped the rise. Over a 12-month period, the number of jobless fell by 8.4% in Portugal, 6.6% in the U.K., 4.3% in the Netherlands, 1.7% in Belgium and 0.6% in Germany. Everywhere else it rose, with the sharpest rises being recorded in Luxembourg (17.4%), Ireland (7.9%), Denmark (7.4%) and France (6.8%).

INFLATION: A slight rise in April

0.5% higher than in March.

The consumer price index for the 12-nation European Community rose 0.5% in April - that is, by more than what is considered "reasonable". This higher level of inflation was due mainly to higher fares and rents in the U.K. and a rise in the price index in Greece, according to Eurostat, the Community's statistical office.

Prices in fact rose by 2.3% in Greece and 1.2% in the U.K. In most of the other Community countries the increases were between 0.2% and 0.5%. Luxembourg even recorded a decline of 0.2%.

Since the beginning of the year prices have risen by 1.6% for the Community as a whole, as against 1.2% over the same period last year. During these first four months, the majority of the member states have experienced higher price rises than at the same time last year. The only exceptions have been the Netherlands, Italy, Spain and Portugal.

ENVIRONMENT: Computers in the service of safety

A new European information system for dangerous chemicals.

The transport of dangerous chemicals will soon be an open book for policemen and firemen in the 12-nation European Community. Since the end of May they have access to a computerized service which can quickly give them all the information they need on how to handle dangerous chemicals which have spilled on the road after a traffic accident.

At Belgium's initiative the information system developed in that country, and known as BIG, was recently fed into the EC data bank on the effect of chemicals on the environment (ECDIN* for short).

BIG holds information on over 4,000 dangerous substances, their properties, the risks they present and how to deal with them in case of accident. The relevant software is in English, German, French and Dutch and couched in language the layman can understand. It will soon be translated into the other Community languages.

* Environment Chemicals Data and Information Network.

INDUSTRY: Heavy-duty lorries are not doing so well

Yet another sector which is being "restructured", but without the Community's intervention.

European-made lorries of over 6 tonnes are selling badly. Between 1980 and 1986 production in all Western Europe fell by 32%, new registration by 11% and exports to third countries by 51%.

The European Commission, which provided these figures to the Belgian Euro-MP, Luc Beyer de Ryke, in reply to a question from him, believes it is up to the firms to decide whether or not to recognize their industry.

Given the fall in demand, especially in developing countries, the European industry is faced with substantial excess capacity. The European Commission has put this at around 100,000 lorries, while total West European production amounted to 286,000 lorries in 1986. Even so, some manufacturers are in the black, as the Commission has pointed out.

SHIPPING: How to stop the decline

From July 1 the Twelve will have greater means of action at their disposal.

While numerous European shipping companies resort to flags of convenience, such as the Panamanian or Liberian, and more than one company engaged in international trade makes use of tramp shipping, the 12-nation European Community is giving itself the means to reverse this situation. New European regulations come into force on July 1. It will then be up to the Twelve to use these new powers with firmness, as the European Transport Commissioner, Stanley Clinton Davis, underlined during a symposium held recently in Antwerp.

The interest in Europe's merchant shipping shown by the Community's leaders is not due simply to a desire to see one or other flag on the high seas. The fact is that the economic and social stakes are high: some 90% of the Community's external trade and 30% of its internal trade is carried in ships.

In 1986 the merchant fleet of the Community's 11 maritime nations accounted for no more than 19% of world tonnage, down from 31% in 1975. It reached a peak in 1980, only to fall by some 40% since then. In 1986 alone Community tonnage declined by more than 12%.

This has meant fewer jobs in both shipping companies and shipyards and has resulted in bankruptcies among shipowners. Of course, some European exporters find it possible to cut their prices by making use of shipping companies that fail to meet international standards of safety, pollution and employment.

But Mr Davis believes that such developments are contrary to the Community's true interests. The EC's transport ministers, for their part, approved at the end of last year several regulations which should allow Community shipping to recover lost ground.

Three of these regulations come into force on July 1. They seek to guarantee healthy competition within the 12-nation Community, to enable it to fight against the unfair pricing practices of third countries and against the restrictive measures of countries which hamper the activities of Community shippers.

Another European regulation, which comes into effect shortly, will allow the European Commission to use stricter criteria in the selection of ships to carry Community food aid.

CULTURE: The Council of Ministers on cultural matters has been cancelled

Commissioner Ripa di Meana expresses his concern at the absence of cultural activity by the Community.

Cultural issues seem to leave some politicians and ministers indifferent. A few weeks ago the Dutch Parliament refused to ratify the convention setting up the European Foundation. The Belgian presidency now finds it impossible to convene the European Community's Cultural Council of Ministers for a meeting scheduled long ago for the month of June.

Unhappily, indifference to the problems of European culture, and to the related economic and spiritual considerations at stake, is nothing new, although one had hoped that a change was taking place, especially in view of the success of the Florence Conference, which brought together economists and experts in computers and telecommunications as well as politicians for four days of discussions on the relation between culture, the economy and technology.

The Rome Treaties do not specifically give the Community competence in cultural matters. But numerous Community policies do have a cultural element. The completion of the single market by 1992 and the prospects for European Union clearly require that concrete projects for European cooperation in the cultural field be drawn up as a matter of urgency.

The Commissioner responsible for cultural matters, Mr Ripa di Meana, reacted at once to the cancellation of the cultural Council. He expressed himself all the more "bitter" and "concerned" as it had come at "a time when there is growing demand in all our countries for participation in the cultural life of both the nation and Europe and the creation of fresh conditions of exchange and cooperation".

The Commissioner did not mince his words. He had the impression, he said, of a "veritable boycott" and dismissed as "an alibi to do nothing" and "a pretext to reduce the European undertaking to a purely mercantilist venture" the hesitations and reservations which continue to hamper Community action in the cultural arena.

The choice of the most suitable institutional framework and of the most effective methods of work deserve, it is true, both discussion and reflexion. But this should take place at once and be constructive. "The Commission", Mr Ripa di Meana concluded, "does not claim to have a ready-made solution for every problem. Europe's cultural interplay is at several levels, requires flexibility and an open mind, must take into account the multiplicity of players and respect national or regional competences. The Commission is determined, nevertheless, to further Community activities which have priority, such as the MEDIA programme, for example, which seeks to promote the audio-visual industry; to refer the matter to the responsible political authorities and to put forward a programme for relaunching cultural activities at the European level".

EDUCATION: Teacher training programmes

The European Commission will back every initiative in this field.

There are some 4½m. teachers in the European Community. Most are relatively young and therefore likely to be responsible for the education of young Europeans for some time to come. It is clear that their initial training, whatever its quality, will not help them to cope with changes over the coming years, when teachers will have to adjust to fresh realities, teaching methods and contents, call on the new technologies and make sure their teaching meets the needs of the time.

The only way to achieve this, as the European Community's education ministers recognized when they met in May, is through a continuous process of training. Hence the European Commission's wish to do more in this field.

To this end it will promote further meetings and exchanges, so that teachers can profit from each others experience. It is particularly important to increase the resources devoted to training and to provide a coherent programme, one which ensures continuity between the training received initially and that given continuously over the teacher's professional life-time.