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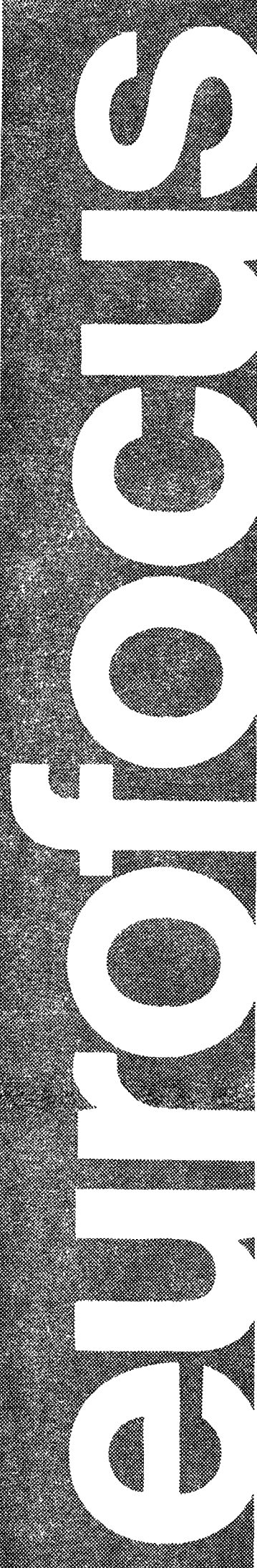
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Mailed from: Brussels X



EMPLOYMENT: 14 weeks of maternity leave at full pay

The European Commission proposes legislation for 1992.

Fourteen uninterrupted weeks of maternity leave at full pay or corresponding social security is a level of protection that working mothers enjoy in only three European Community countries - Germany, Greece and Luxembourg. The European Commission has now proposed to the EC Council of Ministers that these measures be extended throughout the 12-nation Community in the run-up to 1992.

In a proposal for a European "law" which it sent to the Twelve on September 12, the European Commission wants them to grant working mothers 14 weeks of maternity leave, at least two of which would be taken just before the birth of their child. At present some EC countries offer longer maternity leave, but the period is only 12 weeks in the Netherlands and 90 days (13 weeks) in Portugal. And in only five countries do working mothers receive full pay while on leave; they are Germany, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Portugal. In other EC countries they receive between 70 and 80% of their salary, while in Belgium they are on full pay but only four weeks.

Other protective measures for working mothers proposed by the Commission include a ban on night work for a period of at least 16 weeks before and after giving birth to a child, including at least eight weeks before the anticipated date of delivery; steps to ensure that women who are pregnant or have recently given birth are not exposed to agents or processes which could harm their health and, finally, a ban on making women redundant on the grounds that they are pregnant or have just given birth to a child.

The Commission's proposal aims, above all, to provide all women in the European Community a minimum level of protection; it leaves Member States free to adopt more generous provisions if they so desire. But the proposal also tries to make it easier for women to reconcile work and motherhood. This is a concern close to the heart of Ms Vasso Papandreou, the European social affairs commissioner, in a Community facing declining birth rates (see p. 5) and in which women are underemployed as compared to other industrialized regions of the world.

TRANSPORT: Smile as you drive

European Road Safety Week will be held from 1 to 7 October.

Some 70,000 people are killed on Europe's roads each year, and one million seriously injured. In the dock, as usual, are alcohol, fatigue and excessive speed as well as aggressiveness and indiscipline of motorists and defective cars and inadequate technical checks. To this list must be added the inevitable certainty of drivers that "accidents happen to others". But the fact is that every European, including infants, has one chance in 4,000 of being killed in a road accident and one in 300 of being handicapped for life. Drugs and AIDS are much less of a scourge.

In order to alert public opinion to this problem, October 1 to 7 has been declared European Road Security Week, on the initiative of the United Nations' Economic Commission for Europe, which brings together the countries of both East and West Europe that are members of the UN. The launch took place on September 12, with a press conference, in the course of which the European transport commissioner, Karel Van Miert, described the European Community's initiatives in this field. Several proposals from the European Commission are before the EC Council of Ministers, dealing notably with traffic rules, the mandatory use of safety belts, alcohol levels in blood tests and speed limits for trucks and buses. The Council has already taken important decisions in the field of technical standards for new vehicles, while traffic rules which guarantee a high level of safety have been drawn up and adopted.

Equally important is the proposal currently before the Council, which sets the maximum length of trucks (18.5 metres or 60.7 feet), and is aimed at halting the race for ever-larger juggernauts. The European Commission is also insisting that all Member States ensure that the regulations dealing with work and rest periods for truck drivers are strictly adhered to.

The European Commission envisages certain other measures and initiatives, in order to ensure a coherent approach to the issue of road safety, even if it must take into account the reservations of countries such as Britain, Denmark and Germany, which hold the view that the Community has no competence in the matter.

SPORT: The European Community cycle races

France's Catherine Marsal wins the first race for women and Belgium's Johan Bruynel the 5th race for men.

The European Community Cycle Race, which has already become a permanent fixture of the sporting calendar, featured a major innovation this year: a cycle race for women, in line with the equal opportunities policy promoted by the European Commission. The race takes over from the Tour de France for women, and was won in fine style by the young world champion from France, Catherine Marsal.

The first cycle race for women was given a splendid send-off. It followed the same itinerary, although over a shorter distance, as the race for men, which was won by Belgium's Johan Bruynel in a photo finish. From Roubaix to Luxembourg, the race passed through five Community countries - France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany and Luxembourg - from September 6 to 14. It was in the image of the European Community itself, "without frontiers and open to the world". The teams taking part came from not only Community countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Portugal) but also the German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union and the United States. Six EC teams, from Belgium, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and the U.K. took part in the women's cycle race, alongside teams from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, the United States and the Soviet Union.

A blue jersey with gold stars now takes its place among the highly-prized yellow and other jerseys cyclists fight over each year.

POPULATION: The 12-nation EC leads the world in falling birth rates

Fertility in North Africa is three times higher than in the Community.

With an average of 1,6 children per woman, the European Community has the world's lowest fertility rate. The fact is the world average is 3.4 children, with peaks of 6.2 in Africa - 5.4 in North Africa - and 4.3 in India. Even the other highly developed areas of the world have higher fertility rates than the 12-nation Community, with 1.7 children per woman in the other countries of Western Europe and Japan, 1,8 in the United States and 2 in Central and Eastern Europe.

Even so, in none of the world's most developed areas do fertility rates reach the fateful figure of 2.1 children per woman, which is the rate at which population renews itself, according to the report published last month by Eurostat, the European Community's statistical office. At 2.38 and 2.40 children per women, fertility rates in the Soviet Union and China respectively are barely above this level, although they are much higher in most developing countries.

The countries of the Mediterranean basin offer a sharp contrast, however. For the first time in history, two areas which are practically neighbours - the southern regions of the European Community and North Africa - have widely differing fertility levels. The Community's four Mediterranean members all have average fertility rates below two children per woman; Italy even has the lowest rate in the Community, with 1.34 children. On the other side of the Mediterranean, fertility rates average four children per woman in Tunisia, nearly five in Morocco, six in Algeria and nearly seven in Libya and Syria, while the corresponding figure for Turkey is over 3,5.

The number of births in the European Community fell by 25.3% between 1960 and 1988. Those under 15 years of age accounted for only 18% of the Community population in 1988, as against 33% for the world as a whole and 45% for Africa - 42% for North Africa. At the same time, those over 65 years amounted to 14% of the Community's population, as compared to only 3% in the case of the African continent and 4% in that of India.

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But as the Eurostat experts point out, the fall in birth rates in recent years is less dramatic than the statistics would suggest. This is because of a "delay" in the timing of births, due to the fact that women are having their first child at a later age: the average age was nearly 26 years in 1987, as compared to 24.5 years in 1970.

Despite falling birth rates, there has been a slight increase in the number of marriages. After falling steadily from the beginning of the 1970s to the mid-1980s, the number stabilized in 1986 and 1987; in 1988 there was a further rise, with 17,400 more marriages than in the previous year.

Remarriages seem to be very much in favour. In the 12-nation Community more than 300,000 men and 278,000 women remarried in 1987, as against only 183,000 and 146,000 respectively in 1960.

HEALTH: Going easy on sweeteners

The European Commission proposes maximum permitted levels for 1992.

All weight watchers are very familiar with artificial sweeteners, such as saccharine, aspartame and thaumatine. To ensure that these sweeteners - and the foodstuffs which contain them - can be sold freely throughout the single European market, without endangering the health of consumers, the European Commission proposed common rules for their use to the Twelve at the end of August.

The proposed legislation sets maximum permitted levels for sweeteners whose use is authorized in foodstuffs. It is the first in the series of projected Community "laws" on food additives - the artificial flavours and colours, for example, whose names are to be found on packages of frozen and tinned foods. The European Community last year adopted general rules for food additives as a whole.

TRANSPORT: The North-South passage is open to long-distance traffic

A compromise agreement opens the Brenner but a global and firm solution must be found to the problem of trans-alpine traffic.

Italy, Germany and Austria have ended, provisionally at least, their dispute over the use of long-distance trucks on alpine roads. As a result, they have lifted the restrictions on heavy-duty lorries which were introduced following the collapse in July of a bridge in the Tyrol, on the Munich-Innsbruck-Brenner highway. Italy had closed its border with Austria to lorries as a protest against the restrictions imposed by Vienna on lorry traffic, while Bavaria, faced with a flood of trailers on its narrow mountain roads, had closed the two roads which allowed long-distance lorries to avoid the fallen bridge at Kufstein.

The result threatened to choke off an important part of intra-Community trade by paralyzing North-South traffic.

The European Commission had no choice but to intervene. The task fell logically to the transport commissioner, Karel Van Miert, who handled it well. Following long, often laborious negotiations, the transport ministers of the three countries involved succeeded in reaching an agreement. This should enable traffic to the west of Austria to be gradually normalized by mid-1991. Following this agreement, the bridge over the Inn at Kufstein has been opened since September 1 to 1,500 lorries per day and from September 15 to 2,000 to 2,500 lorries. From 1 January 1991 the numbers will be further increased to 3,000 per day, to reach the status quo ante of 4,000 lorries towards the middle of the year.

While welcoming the outcome, Mr Van Miert nevertheless reaffirmed his conviction that a global agreement on trans-alpine traffic will have to be reached quickly. Negotiations to this end are already taking place between the European Community, Switzerland, Austria and Yugoslavia. Any agreement will have to protect the environment by banking on combined road/rail transport, even while reaching a modus vivendi over the actual road traffic, pending the construction of the necessary equipment.

Any such modus vivendi will have to take into account the growing hostility of local populations to road traffic, especially as trans-alpine traffic should double between now and the year 2010-2020, even while road capacity in the alpine countries remains unchanged. On the contrary, other restrictions can be envisaged,

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restrictions on night traffic and on the size and weight of lorries. Switzerland, for example, has reiterated its refusal to open a passage through Swiss territory for long-distance lorries of 40 tonnes. The only alternative is to build new rail links as well as new tunnels (such as the one the Swiss envisage under the St Gotthard) and to enlarge the capacity of existing tunnels, in order to reverse the trend to the railways - if one is to find a solution acceptable to the people concerned.

A PEOPLE'S EUROPE: Crystal trophy for Europe

Robert Rigot's "Twelve stars in crystal" will symbolize Europe.

The European Communities have never had a prestigious trophy, symbolizing Europe and suitable for presentation at major sporting, scientific or cultural events. Hence the competition which the European Commission launched in 1989 for a "Twelve stars in crystal" trophy among EC manufacturers of fine glassware.

The ECU 15,000 prize was awarded by a European panel of judges to the French sculptor Robert Rigot (Grand Prix de Rome). His entry - "Twelve stars in crystal" - was created in the workshops of the Compagnie des Cristalleries de Baccarat, a world-famous French company. The sculpture, which is 55 cm. high and weighs 43 kg., is made of the purest white crystal. It consists of European flags, with the distinctive 12-star emblem.

Robert Rigot is a graduate of the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris and studied at the Academie de France in Rome. In addition to winning first prize for sculpture in the Grand Prix de Rome, he won numerous other international prizes and medals, and has exhibited all over the world since 1960.

Three other artists were commended by the judges, and their works may also be presented on certain special occasions. They include a sculpture by Claude Frederic Bromet of France, a work by the Dutch sculptor S. van der Marel and a sculpture by Ireland's Roy Cunningham. The pieces were created by the Cristalleries de St. Louis, the Vereenigde Glas Fabrieken "Royal Leerdam" and Waterford Crystal.

UNEMPLOYMENT: Unchanged in July

Unemployment is at 8.6% since March in the 12-nation EC.

The level of unemployment in the 12-nation European Community was unchanged in July, when the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate stood at 8.6%, on the basis of the International Labour Office definition. The rate thus remains unchanged since March, the European Community's statistical office, Eurostat, announced in early September. But the situation varies from one EC country to another. The unemployment rate fell in only Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands in July; it was stable in France, Ireland, Italy and Luxembourg while it rose in the other EC countries.

Youth unemployment rates are above the Community average, although there was a slight fall in July to 16.1%, as compared to 16.3% the previous month, for the EC as a whole. Even so, unemployment among those under 25 years of age rose sharply between March and July in a certain number of countries, notably Belgium, Denmark and Ireland but also the U.K. Eurostat points out that students now tend to look for a job earlier than before.

ENERGY: Iraq and Kuwait account for 11% of the EC's crude oil imports

Denmark and the Netherlands are the largest importers of Kuwaiti oil.

Oil from Iraq and Kuwait has ceased to flow since the United Nations trade embargo began. But for the European Community as a whole these two countries account for only a small part of its total oil imports: 11% in 1989, 7.7% of which came from Iraq and 3.3% from Kuwait, according to figures published in August by Eurostat, the EC's statistical office in Luxembourg.

But the level of imports varies from country to country. Denmark, for example, imported nearly 55% of its crude oil from Kuwait, while Dutch imports from both Iraq and Kuwait amounted to 25% of total imports last year. The corresponding figure for Greece was 18.5%. Ireland, however, imports no Kuwaiti or Iraqi oil; while German imports amounted to no more than 2%.

This is small consolation to motorists, who have watched petrol prices climb steadily since the Gulf crisis began.