



NEWS ITEMS OF GENERAL INTEREST

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INDEX

Page

| | |
|---|---|
| <u>JOB</u> S: Fighting unemployment at the European Union level It would involve looking at the successes and shortcomings of each EU country | 2 |
| <u>ENVIRONMENT</u> : "Cleaner" factories and natural surroundings The European Union is providing EUR 65 million for 152 environmental projects | 4 |
| <u>HEALTH</u> : Asbestos will soon be outlawed from the European Union All the ways in which it can still be used will be banned. | 6 |
| <u>CONSUMERS</u> : The Internet as a market place A European proposal to prevent high-pressure salesmanship – and mistakes. | 7 |
| <u>UNEMPLOYMENT</u> : Some 300,000 fewer unemployed people in July... ...when the unemployment rate fell to 9.3%, as against 9.4% in June. | 8 |
| <u>INFLATION</u> : Price increases accelerated slightly in July... ...to 1.1% in both the euro zone and the EU as a whole. | 8 |
| <u>POPULATION</u> : The EU has more than 375 million inhabitants Immigration resulted in a slight rise in numbers in 1998. | 9 |

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JOBS: Fighting unemployment at the European Union level

It would involve looking at the successes and shortcomings of each EU country.

Unemployment is a problem which all European Union (EU) countries have been facing for several years now. Some countries and regions have been more successful than others in creating jobs and avoiding long-term unemployment. The EU, however, can help all of them combat unemployment more effectively by telling each of them where they are doing reasonably well, and at the same time asking them to take certain steps in problem areas.

A proposal along these lines was made by the European Commission to the EU Council of Ministers in early September, as part of a package of measures to promote employment. It was the very first proposal of its kind to be made by the Commission, and it was made possible by the Amsterdam Treaty which came into force on May 1. and allows the EU to make such recommendations to its member states.

If the proposal is adopted by the Council, the EU will ask the UK, for example, to encourage a partnership approach, involving both trade unions and employers' organizations, to the modernization of the way in which work is organized. Ireland would be asked to adopt a global strategy aimed at increasing women's participation in the labour market. Germany and France would be asked to discourage early retirement, and Portugal to improve its educational system.

These recommendations are not the work of desk-bound bureaucrats, but are based on a detailed examination of the job situation in the various EU countries, in the light of measures the EU has already taken. The fact is that the EU has been active in the fight against unemployment at the European level for nearly two years now. It has adopted employment guidelines for 1998 and 1999 which apply to all 15 member states. To ensure their implementation, each EU country has adopted a national action plan.

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We now know how member states carried out their 1998 action plans, and how they have implemented the 1999 European guidelines; this information can be found in a extensive report, published in early September. With this as its starting point, the European Commission was able to propose both the employment guidelines for 2000 and its very first recommendations to member states.

The report notes that the number of people with jobs in the EU rose by 1.8 million in 1998; this was twice as many as in the previous year. Even so, this figure is below the peak reached in 1991. The situation remains a matter of concern for certain groups of Europeans. Thus slightly over half the women of working age have a job; this is true of fewer than 48% of men and women between the ages of 50 and 64. What is more, the number of people who have been jobless for more than a year fell only marginally last year, when it stood at 5.2 million.

Through its employment guidelines for 1998 and 1999 the EU is trying to promote four key objectives. They are the effective integration of the jobless into the labour market; developing the entrepreneurial spirit; encouraging businesses and their employees to adapt to change, and strengthening equality of opportunity for women and men.

The guidelines now proposed for the year 2000 retain these four objectives, with changes here and there. To begin with, there should be more preventive action at the individual level, with a view to the effective integration of the jobless into the labour market, before they fall into the unemployment trap. Next, access to the Internet should be made easier in schools, so as to allow students to acquire skills in the field of Information Technology.

The Commission's recommendations stress two desirable changes. The first of these is the modernization of work organization, to be carried out on the basis of agreements between trade unions and employers' organizations. The second is job creation at the local level, with the participation of public employment services. Finally, and no less important, is the emphasis which the proposed employment guidelines put on maintaining those who are over 50, or even 60 years of age, in active life.

The most significant commitment by EU member states on employment is to offer a fresh start, by 2002 at the latest, to every unemployed young person before he or she has been jobless for six months, and for 12 months in the case of all other people without jobs. So far four countries honour this undertaking. They are Britain, Ireland, Denmark and Sweden. Another five should have taken the necessary steps by 2002. They include Austria, Finland, France, Portugal and Spain. According to the report, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands should do more, while Belgium, Greece and Italy have fallen behind.

The other quantified commitment – it provides for the participation of at least 20% of unemployed persons in such “active measures” as professional training and work experience – was given by half the EU countries. Five have promised to meet it by 2002; they are Austria, France, Greece, Portugal and Spain. The corresponding situation in Britain, Italy and the Netherlands is not known.

ENVIRONMENT: “Cleaner” factories and natural surroundings

The European Union is providing EUR 65 million for 152 environmental projects.

Oil and its by-products, such as fuel oil, blacken the seas, even in the absence of oil slicks. And the task of cleaning up beaches, and the seas that wash them, is hardly child’s play. In order to recover the oil and other dangerous substances that have leaked from sunken vessels, a Dutch company will carry out tests using a full-scale model of a radio-controlled robot submarine. A UK firm will develop novel, low-cost biodegradable absorbent materials for waste water treatment, while an Irish firm will study solvent and energy recovery technologies.

The European Union (EU) will co-finance these three projects, as well as another 149 environmental projects, in the framework of its LIFE programme. An announcement to this effect was made by the European Commission at the end of August.

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The 152 projects in question are the latest to be co-financed by LIFE, the only EU programme which supports ecological initiatives in all parts of Europe, irrespective of how well-off they are. LIFE has a total budget of EUR 450 million* for the period from 1996 to 1999. It supports three main types of projects, through LIFE-Nature, which seeks to protect animals and plants, as well as their habitat; LIFE-Environment and LIFE-Third Countries, for projects involving non-EU countries also.

The 152 new projects, for which the EU is providing EUR 65 million, are being undertaken in the framework of LIFE-Environment, which is devoted to improving the environment. The projects approved for co-financing range from a demonstration plant for the treatment of oil wastes and sludge, to the sustainable management of high tourist flows and the creation of job opportunities.

As many as 84 of the projects will be implemented by local authorities. Projects for the elimination and treatment of waste are the most numerous, particularly in Ireland, Belgium, Greece and Spain. An Austrian project will tackle the recycling of waste. The University of Wales will study the problem of restoring biodiversity at former mining sites, while Kerry County Council in Ireland will implement a waste management project called ANSWER – A New Solid Waste Environmental Response. The Dutch town of Swolle will set up a water distribution system in a new industrial zone, which will both save water and reduce pollution.

Another 59 projects are designed to develop clean technologies. Here, too, waste disposal ranks high, with companies from several countries working either to limit the quantities of waste that are generated, or to recycle them. Other projects are aimed at making industry more environment-friendly. A UK firm will implement and evaluate an innovative way of reducing emissions of volatile organic compounds in the printing industry, while an Italian firm will seek to reduce considerably the environmental impact of textile printing.

The nine remaining projects will lay the foundations for further activities, particularly in the areas of water and waste.

Detailed information on the various projects can be found on the Internet at:

<http://europa.eu.int/comm/life/home.htm>

*1 EUR = UK £0.65 or IR 0.79.

HEALTH: Asbestos will soon be outlawed from the European Union

All the ways in which it can still be used will be banned.

Asbestos in all its guises will be banned throughout the 15-nation European Union (EU). The six kinds of asbestos in existence can cause cancer, particularly lung cancer, and scar the lungs of those who handle it or breathe it in. The EU banned five of the six varieties in 1991, and made the use of the sixth, chrysotile or white asbestos, illegal in the case of 16 groups of products. The European Commission has now decided to prohibit other uses of this type of asbestos.

White asbestos is still used in the manufacture of asbestos cement products, certain pipes and roofing, in brake and clutch linings for heavy vehicles and, finally, in certain types of seals and gaskets. It is already banned in nine of the 15 EU member states; they are Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden. But there are derogations from the ban, which vary from one EU country to another.

Under the recent EU decision, all EU countries will have to prohibit the use of white asbestos by 1 January 2005 at the latest. The fact is that reliable substitutes can now be found for all uses of chrysotile except one. The exception, and it is a very limited one, is the diaphragm used for electrolysis in certain chlorine plants. But as these diaphragms are used in a closed system on-site, the risk to health and to the environment is very small. Hence its exemption from the recent decision banning the use of white asbestos. Even so, the derogation will be re-examined in 2003.

The EU also plans to re-examine a 1983 directive, or European law, regulating the handling of the asbestos to be found at the workplace. The aim is to do more to protect those who must remove it, as well as those who repair or maintain buildings containing asbestos.

Further information is available on the Internet at
<http://europa.eu.int/comm/dg03/directs/dg3c/index.htm>

CONSUMERS: The Internet as a market place

A European proposal to prevent high-pressure salesmanship – and mistakes.

You have a personal computer (PC), surf the Internet and you would now like to use it to order software, records, books...But you do not want to be inundated with offers for products of no interest to you and which have not asked for. Nor do you want to run the risk of finding yourself required to pay for an item not selected by you.

A new directive will shortly meet these legitimate concerns, if the European Parliament and European Union (EU) Council of Ministers adopt the proposal sent to them by the European Commission in early September. The proposal amends a directive submitted last year, with a view to establishing a single market, with common rules, for electronic commerce in the EU. It takes into account the changes sought by members of the European Parliament, in order to clarify certain points of particular interest to consumers.

Under the terms of the Commission's proposal, all EU member states will have to ensure that consumers can register their names – on so-called opt-out registers – if they do not wish to receive unsolicited commercial offers. Internet service providers will have to monitor these registers on a regular basis, in order to ensure that consumers' wishes are being followed.

Where a consumer agrees electronically – by clicking on an icon, for example - to purchase a product or service, the Commission's proposal specifies that the contract is concluded when an acknowledgement of receipt of acceptance is received electronically by the purchaser.

The seller must make it possible for the purchaser to obtain information which would allow him to identify and correct handling errors and accidental transactions before the conclusion of the contract. Finally, the seller will have to provide the buyer with the contract terms, in a way that will allow him to store and reproduce them.

UNEMPLOYMENT: Some 300,000 fewer unemployed people in July...

...when the unemployment rate fell to 9.3%, as against 9.4% in June.

After staying level for three months, the European Union (EU) unemployment rate fell in July to 9.3%, as against 9.4% the previous month, according to Eurostat, the EU's statistical office, which released these figures in early September. It put at 15.8 million the number of people who were unemployed in July, on the basis of International Labour Office criteria. This represented a fall of some 300,000 as compared to June.

Luxembourg continued to enjoy the lowest unemployment rate in the EU in July, with 2.8%. It was followed by the Netherlands (3.2% in June), Austria (4.3%), Portugal (4.5%), Denmark (4.5% in June), the UK (6.1% in May), Ireland (6.7%), Sweden (6.8%), Belgium (9%) and Germany (9.1%). Countries with unemployment rates above the EU average included Finland (9.8%), France (11%), Italy (12% in April) and Spain (15.9%). Information on Greece remained unavailable.

INFLATION: Price increases accelerated slightly in July...

...to 1.1% in both the euro zone and the EU as a whole.

Price rises gathered pace in July in the European Union (EU), rising to 1.1% on an annualized basis in both the 11-nation euro area* - where it stood at 0.9% in July - and the EU as a whole - as against 1% in June. However, the inflation rate this July was below the level recorded in July, 1998, when it stood at 1.4% for the EU, according to a recent report by Eurostat, the EU's statistical office.

Inflation in the EU is now highest in Spain (2.1%). It is followed by Denmark (2%), Ireland and Portugal (1.9%), Greece and the Netherlands (1.8%), Italy (1.7%), Finland (1.4%) and the UK (1.3%). Countries with inflation rates below the EU average include Belgium (0.7%), Germany (0.6%), France (0.4%), Austria (0.3%) and Sweden (0.2%). In Luxembourg, the price index fell by 0.3%.

* Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain.

POPULATION: The EU has more than 375 million inhabitants

Immigration resulted in a slight rise in numbers in 1998.

The 15-nation European Union (EU) had a total population of 375.33 million on January 1, a slight increase in relation to the 374.6 million recorded a year earlier. This increase is largely due to immigration, as a report published recently by Eurostat, the EU's statistical office, points out.

Population levels rose in all member states except Germany. For several years now the EU's birth rate has been too low to allow the renewal of generations. Instead of the 2.1 children per woman which experts believe is necessary for generational renewal, the EU has only managed 1.45 children per woman, with a maximum of 1.94 in Ireland, and a minimum of 1.15 in Spain. By comparison, China's fertility rate is 1.80, that of the United States 2.07 and that of India 3.24.

The slight population increase recorded at the level of the EU has not prevented the depopulation of some parts of Europe, as another Eurostat report points out. The trend is already evident in eastern Germany, northern Spain, France's Massif Central, several regions in Italy and in eastern Finland.

By 2025 more than 40% of the regions of the present 15-nation EU will have witnessed a decline in population, according to the experts. The regions with the biggest declines, in relation to 1995 population levels, would be Alentejo in Portugal, Liguria in northern Italy, the Basque country, Rioja in Spain as well as the federal states of eastern Germany.

Even so, several regions would witness a sharp increase in population. This would be true of Lincolnshire and the Grampian region, the Dutch province of Flevoland, the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla in north Africa, the Portuguese islands of the Azores and Madeira, Luxembourg and the Languedoc-Roussillon region of France.

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