



## trade union information

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Contents:

1. European unions, employers and governments discuss measures to combat unemployment
2. Commissioner Borschette stresses union role in reorganising society
3. Equal treatment for men and women at work
4. ETUC statement on economic situation
5. ETUC calls for workers' councils at multinational level
6. Belgian unions obtain pre-pension agreement

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THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY IS A PLATFORM FOR GETTING A GRIP ON OPPOSING FORCES - BY A. GROENEVELT, PRESIDENT, INDUSTRIAL WORKERS UNION IN THE NETHERLANDS NATIONAL CENTRE NVV.

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- 1 -

## 1. EUROPEAN UNIONS, EMPLOYERS AND GOVERNMENTS DISCUSS MEASURES TO COMBAT UNEMPLOYMENT

The EEC standing committee on employment held its first meeting for two years on 17 February 1975 in Brussels. This committee, like the wider "social conference", is organised on a tripartite basis, with governments, unions and employers, as well as the Commission, being represented. A dispute over the representation of trade unions in the committee since enlargement of the Community, now solved, had delayed the holding of a meeting. With unemployment standing at 3.7 million in the Community, the Committee's work has assumed new importance.

Michael O'Leary, Minister of Labour of the Republic of Ireland, chaired the meeting. All countries of the Community were represented by ministers of labour or secretaries of state (except for Denmark, where a new government had only just taken office). Theo Rasschaert, general secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation, led the trade union group. Dr Patrick Hillery, Commissioner dealing with social affairs, represented the European Commission.

After a review of measures taken by the different countries to combat unemployment, the meeting discussed what supplementary action should be taken by the Community.

As regards general economic measures for the improvement of the employment situation, the trade union side called urgently for a union-employer meeting not only with ministers of labour but also with ministers of finance. The other parties had no objection to such an economic and social conference, and the meeting concluded that the ministers of finance should be approached on the matter. Later in the day it was reported that the European ministers of finance, meeting separately, had agreed to hold a joint session with the ministers of labour. This was characterised by the chairman as a step in the right direction.

The union side proposed sector-by-sector meetings of unions and employers to discuss the maintenance of employment in five areas particularly affected by the economic crisis - automobile, textile, chemicals, building and glass. This proposal met with general approval, the employers insisting that meetings should be convened only when concrete proposals could be considered. Dr Hillery offered the facilities of the Commission for such meetings.

The committee further considered the use of the European Social Fund as an instrument for combatting the economic crisis. Several representatives stressed that the Fund had been designed for a relatively full employment situation, where a limited number of intractable areas and declining industries needed attention. The resources of the Fund (390 million units of account - £ 163 m at the official rate - in 1975) were limited and should not be diverted from these primary tasks. Others called for concrete action under article 4 of the Fund, opening it up to new sectors such as the automobile industry and to new groups, such as young people looking for their first job, who were particularly hit by the current crisis. Certain speakers felt that the present economic downturn was more than a temporary combination of economic recession and structural change of certain industries; the EEC should be thinking of a supplementary response, which might take the form of an "employment fund" designed to last as long as unemployment remained high in the nine countries. The union side stressed the need for reform of the Fund: it should be a means not only of retraining workers but of ensuring that they find new employment.

The committee had a preliminary discussion on the Commission's action programme concerning migrant workers and their families, which is now being examined by the European Parliament and the Economic and Social Committee before going to the Council of Ministers for approval.

It would appear that the rate of unemployment among migrant workers in the Community is higher than that among nationals; the Commission will gather up-to-date information on a Community-wide basis about employment of migrant workers and make proposals for action.

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According to a press release issued after the meeting the French trade union organisation CGT, which is represented on the Committee, wants to see the following items raised at the next meeting:

- 1) Examination of statutory dispositions recommending each member state to take legislative measures allowing for retirement at 60 years for men and 55 years for women. This examination is based on the principle that it is preferable to pay allowances to pensioners than to unemployed.
- 2) Examination of statutory dispositions recommending the application of the 40 hour working week without loss of salary. These dispositions should also recommend the attribution of powers to unions to ensure that the 40 hour week is effectively applied as well as penal sanctions against employers who do not apply it.
- 3) Examination of a range of contractual and legal dispositions guaranteeing employment to workers and removing from employers the unilateral right to dismiss wage-earners individually or collectively if the motive is not recognised as being well-founded.

## 2. COMMISSIONER BORSCHETTE STRESSES UNION ROLE IN REORGANISING SOCIETY

European Commission member A. Borschette affirmed that 1975 should be a year for reflection, new directions and courage in Europe, when speaking to the Luxembourg Association of Engineers on 25 January 1975.

He recalled that four million workers in the Community spent Christmas together with their families without having jobs and that countless others were threatened with loss of jobs.

He further stressed the indissoluble links which now existed between the destiny of Europe and that of the third world. The economic organisation of our society and our whole conception of society had to be rethought, in terms of internal solidarity and responsibilities towards the third world.

For our future economic growth to be healthy, he continued, new investments should be selective. This selectivity should be in accordance with a political conception of society. Moreover "these selective investments, these choices and sacrifices can no longer be decided by employers alone. These choices and sacrifices, these advantages and renunciations, must henceforth be decided in common agreement by the employers and trade unions. Otherwise no choice will be possible and there will be no social peace. We all know what human dramas can be provoked by the ceasing of production, however justified on rational economic grounds. Convincing will not be enough, participation in decision-making is called for".

Speaking of solidarity on various levels, Albert Borschette affirmed that "in a period of sacrifices firstly everybody must make sacrifices and secondly they should not be the same for the poor as for the rich. This state of things does not pertain in all the countries of the Community.

- 3 -  
3

"Outdated organisation of society, grave injustices in the tax systems, a lack of concertation in the organisation of work and the distribution of wealth ensure that very often in our countries the working masses consider that they are the ones who bear the real burden and that they alone make the sacrifices. This is an observation, not a judgment; this is an objective factor and it would be vain to deny its existence. In the long term it can put democracy in danger and lead once more to adventures. And certain countries will come dangerously near to this situation if in the future there is not greater equality in wealth and greater fairness in sacrifice".

### 3. EQUAL TREATMENT FOR MEN AND WOMEN AT WORK

The Commission has approved a communication to the Council and a draft directive aimed at ensuring equal treatment for men and women where access to employment, vocational training, promotion and working conditions are concerned. The proposals will implement one of the priority objectives of the Community's social action programme as laid down by the Council Resolution of 21 January 1974.

The number of employed or self-employed women in the Community is estimated to be about 35 million. Their proportion in the total working population ranges from 35% to 40% in most of the Member States and is about 25% in the Netherlands, Italy and Ireland. The increase in the number of married women at work is a significant phenomenon.

Women's position in the labour market has three main characteristics:

1. concentration in the services and in lesser skilled and lower-paid jobs;
2. inadequate education and training for a trade or profession;
3. influence of marriage and motherhood on the working career and the difficulties women have in reconciling their careers with family responsibilities.

#### Directive and communication

The new draft directive is designed to complement the directive on equal pay for men and women which was adopted by the Council on 17 December 1974. It requests Member States to eliminate within a year of its adoption all legal and administrative measures which discriminate against women at work on the basis of sex, marital or family status. It would also ensure legal remedies for those who consider themselves deprived of equal treatment and would protect them against dismissal or loss of status as a result of taking legal action.

The Communication sets out problems facing women in employment and outlines ways of dealing with them. The Commission realises that statutory means by themselves can only partially achieve the objective of equal treatment for men and women at work. This is why the draft directive which deals with those aspects of discrimination which are the direct responsibility of public authorities needs to be backed up by a whole range of other measures some of which are within the direct responsibilities of the Member States themselves.

For its part the Commission believes that the Community can also play a vital rôle. Among the more important measures put forward in the Communication, it is proposed that there should be more effective use of the Social Fund for training programmes for women and special action in the field on informing women of their rights.

## Social Fund

The existing provisions of the Social Fund rules specify that women over 35 years as well as young workers of both sexes below 25 years are special categories of workers who may benefit for retraining aid from the Fund under Article 5. However, no request for aid aiming specifically at the promotion of women's employment has been submitted since the establishment of the new Social Fund in 1972. Hence, the Commission urgently requests Member States to intensify the search for schemes and pilot projects aimed at promoting more and better jobs for women which could appropriately receive aid from the Social Fund.

The Commission is also examining how Article 4 of the Social Fund can be used to finance special projects specifically aimed at increasing opportunities for women's employment. In this case Community assistance is likely to be available for "integrated programmes" where vocational training is part of a package scheme which also includes an information campaign, industrial acclimatisation, child-care facilities and transformation of jobs.

## Information

Women are often poorly informed of their rights and the means open to them to improve or widen their training or to reconcile more effectively their family and work responsibilities. Action to remedy this situation could consist of compilation and systematic dissemination of information about the overall position of women working in the Community, the success enjoyed by women in jobs traditionally done by men and the publicising of programmes to overcome the usual barriers facing women when looking for suitable jobs.

The Commission, therefore, intends to find effective means to meet this need and ensure that the necessary documentation is made available so that women in the Community are fully informed of important developments affecting them.

## 4. ETUC STATEMENT ON ECONOMIC SITUATION

After making an analysis of the current economic situation, the Executive Committee of the European Trade Union Confederation, meeting in Brussels on 6 February 1975, launched an appeal to European governments to play an active part in seeking international solutions to the crisis.

According to the ETUC the heavy balance of payments deficit of the industrialised world and most of the developing countries requires coordinated recycling of funds held by the oil producers. The statement continues :

"... This recycling is fundamental but not sufficient in itself. The governments must also attack the problem of unemployment and under-employment. They must find the means to maintain demand. Recent measures for recovery taken in the big advanced economies constitute a step in the right direction but have not yet had sufficient effect. Greater measures to stimulate expansion are necessary so as to put other countries in a position to follow.

" The ETUC appeals to European governments to play an advanced role in the conception and execution of international solutions and to take initiatives for launching in each country measures which will contribute to expansion and progress in the living standard and employment.

" The ETUC declares itself ready to participate with governments in the search for durable solutions."

## 5. ETUC CALLS FOR WORKERS' COUNCILS AT MULTINATIONAL LEVEL

At its meeting in Brussels on 6 February, 1975, the Executive Committee of the European Trade Union Confederation passed a resolution in which the institutions of the EEC and EFTA and the Governments of the Member States are called upon to cooperate more closely in the field of workers' rights of participation (information and consultation) in multinational companies. They are urged to take necessary legal steps for a council for the information and consultation of workers' representatives to be set up at the head office of a multinational company, at the request of the trade unions represented in the establishments of that multinational. This council, representative of the workers, should be convened at least three times a year by an elected chairman. It should be able to decide that outside representatives from the trade unions involved and representatives of the appropriate international trade union bodies can participate at its meetings.

In the opinion of the European Trade Union Confederation, workers' rights of representation, which at present are still limited to national legislation, should be extended to the international plane. Furthermore, the ETUC considers that workers' representatives in all multinationals should be granted the right to regular communication amongst themselves.

## 6. BELGIAN UNIONS OBTAIN PRE-PENSION AGREEMENT

A major feature of recent national level bargaining between the Belgian trade union centres and the Belgian employers' federations has been the achievement of a pre-pension agreement. Normal retirement age is 65 for men and 60 for women. Under the new agreement workers who are within five years of retirement age and who are dismissed for reasons not connected with their personal conduct will obtain monthly allowances amounting to a maximum of 88 per cent of their previous net salary up to retirement age; the pre-pension years count towards the state pension which the worker will then achieve.

The monthly allowance is made up of two parts: the unemployment benefit (60 per cent of salary up to a ceiling salary of 22,950 Belgian francs per month) and a special supplement paid by the last employer. If the employer goes out of business, arrangements are made for the supplement to be paid by another instance. Unions and employers will be encouraged to sign agreements under which the employer would insure his potential liability through subscription to a "security of existence fund".

Thus if a firm runs into difficulties and has to undertake dismissals, it would be able to dismiss first those who are in any case nearing retirement age without their bearing financial hardship. However, a procedure with the union representatives in the firm is laid out, so that there should be no abuses of the system by the employers.

### Other social gains

Other main features of the global agreement signed on 10 February 1975 are as follows:

#### 1) Annual holidays

Periods of unemployment on economic grounds will count as periods worked, from the point of view of calculation of annual holidays entitlement.

Workers at present receive four weeks paid holiday, of which three weeks are paid at double the normal rate; as part of a move towards double pay for the whole four-week period, two further working days will be paid at double rate in 1976.

2) Guaranteed minimum wage

As from 1 January 1975 and subject to indexing according to cost-of-living rises after that time, workers aged 21 or over will receive a minimum monthly wage of 15,500 Belgian francs.

3) Equality of treatment

A further tightening up on the application of legal provisions prescribing equality of salaries between men and women workers is envisaged. As to young workers, sector joint committees will receive a recommendation that they should eliminate all discrimination based solely on the grounds of age.

4) Transport

Workers earning up to 450,000 Belgian francs per year will be able to have half the costs of their season tickets on public transport for going to and returning from work subsidised by employers. Sector joint committees will be recommended to make agreements for the payment of 50 per cent of the cost of other means of transport used by their workers, based on the public transport season ticket rates.

5) Working hours

The 40 hour week should be generalised in 1975; exceptionally it may take effect on 1 January 1976. Special attention will be paid to the rhythm of work, to ensure that it does not endanger the health or safety of the worker.

6) Pensions

Besides the pre-pension system already mentioned, the normal age of retirement is reduced to 64 for men who have had a career of 45 years or who have undertaken "heavy, dangerous or dirty" work.

7) Leave for family reasons

Sector committees will be recommended to grant leave for family reasons, without pay.

8. Maternity leave

14 weeks leave on full pay, for female workers in all branches.

In addition, the trade union centres declared that they considered themselves the representative bodies for all categories of workers, including supervisory employees, and that they would leave the sector joint committees or other instances if any attempt was made to introduce other organisations.

Linkage of social benefits to the level of salaries

Another important Belgian trade union aim was finally achieved by 1 January 1975: all social benefits (old-age pensions, unemployment, disability pensions, etc) are now linked not only to the cost of living, but to the salary level each year. A large rise in unemployment benefits (15 per cent on lower salaries to 6 per cent on higher ones) is one of the results of the negotiations with the government.

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7  
THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY IS A PLATFORM FOR GETTING A GRIP ON OPPOSING FORCES

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national centre NVV

The Industrial Workers Union of the NVV, of which I am President, is the largest trade union in the Netherlands, with 200.000 members. It was set up three years ago through mergers and this summer will have its first congress since foundation. At this congress our basic aim will be spelled out : a socialist society on the basis of labour democracy.

Formulated positions are necessary, but remain empty words unless based on concrete policies.

My view is that no individual national trade union movement is in a position to achieve structural changes of society. Therefore trade union policy has to be international, even if national organisations have divergent pasts and retain divergent future visions.

In this article I want to make clear the views of the Industrial Workers Union of the NVV about the European Community. It would be easy to fill a page with our complaints against it: the undemocratic character, the one-sided economic set-up, the nationalism which raises its head at the smallest buffeting. Notwithstanding these complaints, one cannot get away from the fact that the Europe of the nine exists and forms a platform from which to get a grip on the forces opposing a socialist trade union movement at the level where these forces have come into alliance. Discussions on a trade union strategy within the European Community level body are making slow progress. People speak cautiously about European collective agreements and one can speak of meagre results of international action. The time is ripe to put on the agenda the question of whether the trade union movement must bear responsibility for standpoints of the European Commission. Would it not be better to keep one's hands free of consultative bodies and where necessary approach the Council of Ministers directly to obtain decisions.

One thing is certain : in the discussion of this question the trade union movement from none of the nine countries can be left out. The Industrial Workers' Union of the NVV considers it of great importance in its own country to find a common denominator with the catholic and protestant trade union organisations, to widen international trade union contacts and to intensify discussions on community policy.

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(During the next few months we shall be presenting the views of top European trade union leaders on the European Community. They will be speaking for themselves and their unions, and their views will therefore be independent of those of the Commission).