

SECTORAL SOCIAL DIALOGUE: AN OVERVIEW¹

The European social dialogue is a key element of the European social model. It embraces discussions, consultations, negotiations and joint measures taken by the representative organizations of the social partners (employers and employees).

1998: the first step in the sectoral social dialogue

At sectoral level, the social dialogue underwent a major development in 1998. In its Communication *Adapting and promoting the social dialogue at Community level*, the Commission laid the foundations for a reorganized sectoral social dialogue. The Communication laid down precise provisions concerning the establishment, representativeness and operation of new sectoral committees, intended as central bodies for consultation, joint initiatives and negotiation.

Sectoral social dialogue committees are created in order to foster dialogue between the social partners at European level. Established at the joint request of the social partners, they are ultimately approved by the Commission on the basis of representativeness criteria. They must: belong to specific sectors or categories and be organized at European level;

- consist of organizations which are themselves recognized as an integral part of the social-partner structures in the Member States, have the authority to negotiate agreements and be, wherever possible, representative in all Member States;
- have appropriate structures enabling them to participate effectively in the consultation process.

2000: a strategic landmark for the social dialogue

In the context of implementation of the Lisbon Strategy, the Commission stressed the importance of promoting the quality of industrial relations, one of the main points of the Social Policy Agenda 2000-2005. The envisaged measures were as follows:

- to consult the social partners at European level with a view to identifying areas of common interest;
- to monitor and update the study on the representativeness of the social partners at European level;
- to set up a think-tank on the future of industrial relations;
- to promote interaction between the European and national social dialogues through national round tables on issues of common interest;
- to review with the social partners the operation of the social dialogue structures (at both cross-industry and sectoral levels);
- to invite the social partners to develop their own initiatives in their areas of responsibility in order to carry through adaptation to change;
- to implement the strategy for lifelong learning.

2002: a milestone

The Commission's further Communication adopted in 2002, entitled The European social dialogue, a force for modernization and change, constituted a milestone and provided an opportunity to get down

¹Retrieved from website on 19 March 2010
http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/employment_and_social_policy/social_dialogue/c10133_en.htm

to business in order to improve existing structures and foster more effective dialogue so as to guarantee better governance at Union level.

In all the proposed measures, the Commission stresses that the sectoral dialogue is "the proper level for discussion on many issues linked to employment, working conditions, vocational training, industrial change, the knowledge society, demographic patterns, enlargement and globalization". In the light of this, the Commission wishes to:

- pursue its policy of setting up new committees;
- encourage the necessary groupings and cooperation between sectors;
- gear the activities of the sectoral social dialogue committees to dialogue and negotiation only;
- give priority support to committees whose work culminates in practical results representing their contribution to the implementation and monitoring of the Lisbon Strategy;
- re-inforce the role of the Liaison Forum as the preferred arena for information and general consultation.

Since the committees were established, the sectoral social dialogue has given rise to some 350 commitments of different types and scales: opinions and common positions, declarations, guidelines and codes of conduct, charters, agreements, etc. Some of these initiatives, such as the agreements concluded in the transport sector, have led to Community directives. Other texts - declarations or common opinions - have been adopted in order to clarify the position of the social partners on themes directly linked to the future of their sector.

Many measures also deal with major themes of common interest shared by several sectors. This is the case, for instance, with the liberalization of services (postal services, electricity, transport, telecommunications), consolidation of the internal market (banking, insurance, construction, telecommunications), Community policies (agriculture, fisheries, transport), strengthening of competitiveness in a globalised economy (textiles, clothing, footwear and leather), professionalization and the quality of work and services (private security, industrial cleaning and personal services), and the effect of new technologies on work organization (telecommunications, commerce).

In its 2004 Communication Partnership for change in an enlarged Europe, entitled Enhancing the contribution of European social dialogue, the Commission encourages the social partners in different sectors and at European, national and company levels, to continue to enhance the synergies between the various sectors.

SECTORAL SOCIAL DIALOGUE COMMITTEES²

The European social dialogue is a key element of the European social model. It embraces discussions, consultations, negotiations and joint measures taken by the representative organizations of the social partners (employers and employees).

Sectoral social dialogue committees are created in order to foster dialogue between the social partners at European level. Their organizations jointly submit to the European Commission a request to participate in social dialogue at European level. European organizations representing employers and employees must:

- belong to specific sectors or categories and be organized at European levels

²Retrieved from website on 19 March 2010,
http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/employment_and_social_policy/social_dialogue/c10134_en.htm

- consist of organizations which are themselves recognized as an integral part of the social-partner structures in the Member States, have the authority to negotiate agreements and be, wherever possible, representative in all Member States;
- have appropriate structures enabling them to participate effectively in the consultation process.

Composition

Sectoral social dialogue committees consist of a maximum of 50 social-partner representatives, with an equal number of representatives of both employers and employees. They are chaired either by one of the social-partner representatives or, at their request, by the representative of the Commission, which in all cases provides the secretariat for the committees.

Operation

Each committee adopts its own rules of procedure and work programme. It holds at least one plenary meeting per year. More specific questions are dealt with by meetings of extended secretariats or select working groups (employment, health and safety at work, enlargement, training, etc.). In its 1998 Communication *Adapting and promoting the social dialogue at Community level*, the Commission sought to rationalize the operation of the committees with a view to ensuring concrete results from increasingly effective work.

Representativeness

Representativeness is obviously essential for the legitimacy of the social dialogue. For that reason, whenever an application to establish a committee is put forward, the Commission sends the social-partner organizations concerned a questionnaire to enable them evaluate the extent to which they meet the criteria for establishment, such as the authority to negotiate agreements or the representativeness which determines the relevance of the social dialogue. The representativeness requirement will vary depending on the nature of activities. For example, it will be stricter in the case of a negotiated agreement than for simple consultation.