

Week of November 10 to 15

BUSINESS : Investment and industrial cooperation in Greece

- As from January 1981, Greece will become the 10th member of the European Community. This country is endowed with important deposits of raw materials and other resources, but it will need the technological and financial support of the Community to adjust and develop its industry. In addition, the geographic position of Greece should make it a desirable partner for penetration of European commerce into the Middle East and Balkan markets.

In early 1981, probably in March, the European Commission, in conjunction with Greek Governmental services, will organise a conference open free to all types of Community businesses, but especially for mediumsized ones. The aim will be to enable European economic operators to familiarise themselves with the Greek industrial system. They will also be informed concerning procedures, assistance and the relative means of direct or joint investments in partnership with a Greek company.

Additional information on this conference and a registration form may be obtained from the Community's Business Cooperation Centre, 17 rue Archimède, Box 1 and 5, 1040 Brussels.

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A few years ago, European Community authorities passed laws enabling doctors to practise their profession anywhere in the Community. Now research is being carried out into public health...

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SOCIAL : Worker protection in case of corporate failure

With bankruptcies, business failures and unemployment at alarming levels in virtually every European country, attention has naturally been focused recently on measures that can provide remedies or some degree of security for workers. In recent months, thousands of such business failures have been registered which affect not only small and medium-sized enterprises but also major multinational companies. No operation, and least of all the employees of such firms, seems to be immune from the existing economic slump. Even the sizable European subsidiaries of large international corporations have been forced to close their doors after being declared insolvent, often leading to complex legal controversies.

These battles largely aim at obtaining adequate compensation for the workers of the affected firm. They sometimes revolve around the question of who will pay since the employer is obviously out of funds. There are also more difficult questions concerning who is affected as a worker. Are part-time workers, regular consultants, piece-work jobbers or persons that work in their own home, for instance, entitled to severance pay or other indemnities? As might be expected, the laws^{vary/} from country to country among the member states of the European Community. That's why the European Commission in Brussels and Ministers of the individual member states have been studying the complicated problem for years, then finally reached an agreement on the subject recently.

The resulting law, which will have to be applied in all the Community countries in the future, is aimed at not only affording a uniform level of protection for workers throughout the Community but also levelling out national legal differences that could become inducements or barriers for companies to establish in one Community country rather than another.

In general, the new law requires the member countries to establish a national agency that would guarantee to pay the unpaid debts to salaried workers whose employer is insolvent. The states, however, will have the option of deciding whether to restrict the payment obligation of this institution. A number of categories of workers, such as some sea-going workers, dockers, home workers without an employment contract, close relatives of the employer, school employees or those working less than two or three days a week are either excluded or given special treatment in some of the countries as part of the provisions of the measure.

For the most part, most of the member states already have such mechanisms and will therefore only need to make adjustments to their laws. Italy and Ireland, however, have no guarantee organisation corresponding to those required in the new law. Greece, which will join the Community in January, has been involved in the consultations and will implement it just like other members of the Community.

STEEL : Aid for older workers

More than 100,000 jobs in the steel industry have been wiped out in the European Community in the past five years. This figure alone explains why the European Commission recently had to declare a state of crisis in the industry in order to set mandatory production limits for each company. But the European Commission is also preoccupied by the need to ease the social impact of the modernisation of the steel industry that is leading to layoffs. Such aid will be accorded to workers on demand from the national governments affected. It has also proposed that the Council of Ministers for 1981 agree that funds be allocated for early retirement and part-time employment schemes. This assistance will be accorded to workers on demand from the national governments involved. Nevertheless, to obtain such a Community contribution, these requests will have to meet certain conditions. They will have to, first of all, be aimed at workers of at least 55 years of age, or 50 in some specific cases. In addition, the Community would contribute only to supplement payment of similar aid by the national governments up to a limit of 50 percent of total aid. Finally, the Community portion of the cost of these measures will be granted for a maximum of three years for each worker.

The number of workers involved with such plans is divided among 22,900 in France, 35,000 in the United Kingdom and 11,300 in Belgium.

These new programmes will be in addition to the traditional readjustment assistance established in the treaty creating the European Coal and Steel Community. The Commission evaluates their cost at about £86 million. However, the normal level of funding in the Coal and Steel Community budget will not be adequate to meet this additional effort, so the Commission has asked the Council to transfer some £61 million from the general Community budget to the steel budget.

In addition, the Commission has also requested similar programmes to assist older workers caught by a recession in the European Community shipbuilding industry.

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TRANSPORT : Making interregional air travel easier

Outside the main air routes linking European capitals and major provincial airports, interregional air travel within the European Community is still relatively underdeveloped. The European Commission is now getting ready to tackle this problem. In a proposal sent for ministerial approval recently, European Commissioner for transport policy, Richard Burke has called for the introduction of more flexible procedures for authorising scheduled interregional air services for passengers, mail and cargo between Member States.

The new Commission proposal calls for the setting up of Community-wide rules for the authorisation of air transport routes across EEC frontiers which are outside the main trunk routes already in use. The introduction of new routes linking EEC regions is expected to contribute to regional development in the Community as it is clear that the availability of air services is, in many cases, a major consideration in business decisions relating to the choice of a site for the setting up of a new industrial plant.

The new authorisation system recommended by the Commission would make it easier for airlines to obtain traffic rights on routes which they consider can be operated profitably. They will therefore find it easier to establish supplementary services to the existing trunk services. The Commission's proposals also provide objective criteria for use by public authorities which are asked to authorise such services, and provide consumers with more direct means of expressing their views on the operation of the system.

The proposed regulation also lays down the criteria for deciding the air services and routes to be covered by such interregional air services. These would have to link airports which were at least 200 km apart, except where natural obstacles such as the sea or mountains make air transport quicker than land routes. The aircraft to be used on such routes would have a capacity of less than 130 seats.

The Commission also recommends that the air service envisaged must be a scheduled one, with a guaranteed regularity. To qualify as an interregional service, the air service must be between two or more airports in the Community (purely domestic services are, of course, excluded). Links between the EEC's principal airports (category 1), however, will be excluded as will services between such main airports and those secondary airports which handle a certain percentage of international traffic (category 2). Links between all other airports (category 3) will be allowed.

PARLIAMENT: Uniform compensation for victims of violence

The worrisome increase in acts of terrorism and criminal aggression is posing a number of problems for society. It must first of all try to prevent the authors of such acts of violence from committing others, but it must also furnish compensation for the victims as well.

Leaving aside the possibility of these victims seeking reparations or damages directly from the guilty parties, there also exists in six member countries of the European Community a system guaranteeing financial compensation from the state to victims of criminal actions. But the level of protection varies significantly from one country to the next. And there is no legal provision for this in Luxemburg, Belgium or Italy.

On September 28, 1977, the Council of Europe recommended that its member governments agree compensation systems for "all persons having suffered grave bodily injuries as a result of a legal infraction" and went on to define a certain number of concrete principles.

Now the European Parliament also feels that the European Commission in Brussels should go farther in this direction. Its Legal Affairs Committee has just prepared a report asking the European Commission to propose the establishment of a unified system of legislation throughout the nine, and soon to be ten, member countries.

According to the Parliament, the Commission's proposals should primarily aim at setting a minimum level of compensation granted by the state to the victim or its successors and at eliminating all discrimination that could be based on the nationality of the victim. This compensation could be achieved through the social security system, through the installation of a specific compensation system or through insurance.

In conclusion, the Parliamentary committee recalls and underlines that the principle reason for the proposed "European legal zone" that is being discussed is to strengthen protection for all European citizens.

UNEMPLOYMENT: A peek of 7 million unemployed is reached

According to the last estimates supplied by the European Community's statistical office, the threshold of 7 million unemployed throughout the nine member countries was crossed last September. This new increase was not attributed solely to the annual increase at that time of year of young people finishing school and entering the job market for the first time. Between August 1979 and August 1980, unemployment increased by 15.3 percent in the Community. This evolution affected all member states and also continued in September. The unemployment rate for women has also reached 45 percent on average in the Community and a high of 61 percent in Belgium.

SOCIAL AFFAIRS: The war on poverty

In countless cities like Bristol, Reims, Saarbrücken and many others and even along the roads and byways travelled by the thousands of nomads that still live in Europe an effort is being made to study and come to grips with the factors that create poverty.

The poverty that still afflicts millions of European residents may seem obvious -- a shortage of money -- but it also is frequently accompanied by a host of other characteristics, such as poor housing and health alcoholism, one-parent families, inadequate education or training, advanced age and the probable transmission of such problems from one generation to the next. With recent strains on European economies, which have created millions of unemployed, there has also been a tendency to concentrate social programmes and assistance on the new jobless rather than the traditional poor sometimes known as the "fourth world". But they remain and they are in danger of becoming even more isolated and forgotten. That's why local, national and European-scale programmes aimed at studying and relieving the problems of this population take on added importance. One such programme undertaken by the European Community involves a number of pilot projects and studies affecting a number of different categories of hard-core poor in virtually every Community country. They concern children, including second-generation immigrants, the aged, centre-city dwellers, the rural poor and even thousands of itinerant and nomadic peoples. Some projects aim at setting up concrete programmes such as housing, day-care centres, clubs, medical assistance, cooperatives, job-producing activities and others. Yet other aspects of this programme involve research and studies into the characteristics of particularly affected groups or regions.

For instance, interviews have been conducted with some 3000 heads of families in Bristol, Reims and Saarbrücken to acquire in-depth information about their situation so that social assistance policies might be better adapted to their needs. Other studies have compared the poverty-risk potential in the population in certain regions of five Community countries. And another is aimed at the particular life-styles of itinerants and nomads in Germany, Belgium, France and the Netherlands.

Others have involved entire cities, such as Cologne and Reims, regions, such as the Naples-Giugliano area, or urban areas, such as the Marolles in Brussels. Medical facilities, the access of the poor to their legal rights, housing projects and many others have also benefitted from this Community programme, which is currently under review by the Council of Ministers. But all have had a goal of seeking to improve the services and methods of dealing with this vast social problem.

GOOD HEALTH IS ALSO GOOD ECONOMICS

With inflation, unemployment and oil prices all rising, it may seem as if authorities and the public have enough to do without worrying about their health -- especially if they are in good health at the moment. But in actual fact, without becoming a hypochondriac about it, there is plenty to worry about in connection with health. And it has a lot to do with money and the economy.

First of all, the costs of health treatment and medical supplies have been among the fastest-rising elements of most European economies. As a result, the health sector represents, according to some estimates, about 50 percent of the national benefits paid out by Governments. Consequently, in just about every country there is a critical squeeze on social security budgets caused by the increases in costs and insurance payouts. This is why, in addition to their usual attention to purely economic problems, the European Community institutions have been looking at the mounting problems represented by the health sector and are aiming at the introduction of a joint policy in this field later this year.

This is not exactly a new-found interest, but rather an attempt at coordinating more closely what is already a well-founded part of European Community policies. Ever since the founding of the EEC two decades ago, it has been closely involved with at least one specific type of health policy -- occupational health and safety. In the past, this special attention has been focussed on the health and security of workers in the coal mining and steel industries and more recently with those employed in nuclear power plants. But the Community has also become actively involved in the adoption of safety and health standards for all types of workers, especially those in industries handling dangerous substances such as lead, asbestos, cadmium and others. As a result, an ever-widening body of law is being drawn up and enforced to increase the protection of workers in all types of industries.

This type of occupational health and safety is, of course a significant element of society, not only because of the important costs in time and productivity lost because of industrial disease or accident, but also because of the human and social burden such hazards represent.

Originally based on this interest in occupational risks, the European Community's involvement in the health field has also expanded in other broader areas in recent years. That's why there is now a direct Community programme to finance medical and public health research, as well as activity in other areas ranging from health and hospital costs to the safety and use of pharmaceutical products.

For instance, a modest EEC medical research programme is devoted to the detection of thrombosis, the evaluation and treatment of hearing loss, standards for pre-natal monitoring and common standards for electro-cardiography.

Meetings of the nine European Community countries' Health Ministers in recent years have also requested Community authorities to undertake more thorough research and studies into some of the economic aspects of the rapidly increasing costs of medical services and medicines. They entrusted the European Commission in Brussels with the task of conducting certain studies and projects in the fields of health, education, health economics, anti-smoking campaigns, misuse of medicines and mutual assistance in the event of particularly serious illnesses or accidents.

As an example, studies have been developed that indicate the importance of health and medicine in the various Community countries which show the number of physicians in the Community ranging from 120.3 per 100,000 inhabitants in Ireland to 225 for the same level of population in Belgium and Italy, according to 1977 figures. The same study also relates to the production and consumption of pharmaceutical products. This shows that the amount of medication prescribed per person and the percentage of medical costs represented by drugs to be the lowest in the Netherlands and the highest in Italy. Another portion of the study shows that Belgium, with a population of only about 10 million had by far the highest number of pharmacies of the Community countries. Such studies are not carried out just to produce curious facts and figures, but to serve as a basis for sound joint policies among the Nine.

Problems of health and medicine also surface at the European level through studies of the various national insurance schemes to cover risks of sickness and invalidity and in Community legislation providing for the freedom of movement for practitioners in certain medical professions. For instance, since 1975, doctors, since 1980 nurses, dentists and veterinary surgeons and from 1983 midwives have been and will be able to move freely within the European Community in accordance with the provisions of the new EEC laws. In addition, a proposal for a Directive concerning freedom of movement for pharmacists is currently being drawn up.

Action is also going forward in a number of other areas of the world of health and medicine, to create what Social Affairs Commissioner Henk Vredeling recently called "a true European Community of Health".