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Mailed from Brussels X

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VOCATIONAL TRAINING: 298 new European projects

The FORCE programme of continuing training in 1994.

CHEERS is the name chosen by the major British, Belgian and Spanish breweries for a joint training programme for their less skilled workers. This initiative, which has the financial backing of the European Union, involves the trade unions represented in the breweries taking part in the project; its results will also benefit small and medium-sized enterprises in the brewery sector throughout the EU. This project is one of the 298 chosen by the European Commission for this year in the framework of the FORCE programme, which seeks to encourage companies to invest in continuing vocational training, aimed at workers in particular.

This year's FORCE projects, announced by the Commission in mid-January, will receive more than ECU 17 million* in all from the EU budget. They will bring together over 2000 participants from companies, trade unions and training institutions. Some 80% of the companies will be SMEs. Since its launch in 1991, FORCE has backed 720 projects, involving more than 5000 participants from all 12 EU countries. It thus represents the largest European network for the improvement of continuing training. FORCE in fact has been able to accept only 30% of the 2440 applications it has received since it was set up.

Of this year's 298 projects, 113 cover specific sectors of activity, including the agro-food industry, the retail trade and the sale and repair of cars. A rather special area, contractual policy, has been added to them, so that company managers and trade union leaders can negotiate and jointly manage continuing training schemes.

The remaining 165 projects give priority to helping workers adapt to the changes in the manufacturing and service industries. Some seek to anticipate redeployment of workers in order to avoid unemployment, as in the steel industry in Belgium, Germany, Greece and France, or in the potassium mines in Germany and France. Other projects aim at drawing up European professional standards - for those in charge of safety, for example, in a project involving companies from six EU countries.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.76 or IR£0.79

VOCATIONAL TRAINING: Putting regional aid to good use

ECU 1 million for local leaders of regions in difficulty.

The European Union budget will provide nearly ECU 118bn.* between 1994 and 1999 to help with the development of the EU's problem areas**. Experience has shown that giving beneficiaries adequate training ensures that they make the best use of the aid given them. In order to improve training of regional and municipal civil servants in areas facing difficulties, as well as of managers of SMEs, the European Commission decided in mid-January to provide grants for 10 projects involving bodies from several EU countries. Their total amount is ECU 1mn.

The ten projects were selected out of a total of 130, involving aid from the EU budget of ECU 5 million. At the end of next year, the Commission will assess the operation and decide whether or not to continue with it.

* In 1992 prices. Currently 1 ECU = UK£0.76 or IR£0.79

** See Eurofocus N° 36/93

HEALTH: Do-it-yourself healthcare as a safety valve ...

... for social security systems in the European Union.

When Europeans feel unwell without being really ill - as when they have a cold or a headache or an upset stomach - they tend more and more to go to the chemist rather than the doctor. Sales of patent medicines now account for 15 to 20% of the total market for pharmaceutical products in Belgium, Germany and France; but the proportion drops to between 5 to 10% in Spain, Italy and Portugal.

These figures, given at the end of January by the European Commissioner for social affairs, Pádraig Flynn, show the extent to which people are treating themselves in the EU. There are two advantages to this phenomenon, according to the Commissioner: people are accepting greater responsibility for their health and, as a result, reducing the pressure on national social security systems, which are approaching breaking point because of an ageing population and increased needs.

A PEOPLE'S EUROPE: Conscientious objectors

European Parliament is calling for the harmonization of relevant laws and the creation of a European civilian service.

It was quite some time ago that a song by Boris Vian, about a young man who refused to report for military service, was banned in France as an incitement to desertion. While the conscientious objector is no longer reviled as a coward or as a traitor to his country, he can still be incarcerated in a military prison, as some 400 Greek conscientious objectors know only too well.

This has led the European Parliament to ask the European Commission to submit as soon as possible a proposal aimed at (1) harmonizing national laws which safeguard the right to conscientious objection and (2) creating a European civil service. It is a fact that while all EU countries accept the principle of conscientious objection, its implementation varies a great deal from one country to another.

To begin with the nature of the problem is not the same for countries without national service. Thus in Britain and Ireland those who do not wish to bear arms stay clear of the armed forces, and that is all there is to it. But if problems of conscience arise during military service, the professional soldier can ask to be discharged. Luxembourg does not have national service, and it is to be abolished in Belgium from this year. But for the moment national service lasts 8 months, an alternative service in the army 10 months and civilian service outside the armed forces can last from 14 to 18 months.

It is the length and nature of this alternative civilian service which have given rise to a good deal of controversy, as has the procedure for recognition as a conscientious objector. Nearly all Member States take the view that civilian service must last longer, in order to discourage those who might claim to be conscientious objectors in order to avoid, reduce or replace the drudgery of military service with something more attractive. In Greece, for example, where national service lasts from 15 to 24 months, there is no alternative civilian service: conscientious objectors, be their motives religious or philosophical, can undertake military service but without bearing arms, for twice the normal length of time. In 1988 the Greek government had announced it was submitting a draft law on civilian service to Parliament but it has yet to come up for discussion.

There is civilian service in France but it lasts 20 months as against the 10 months of national service. The length of time is doubled in Denmark also: 8 to 24 months instead of 4 to 12. In Germany it is 15 months and 12 months respectively and in Spain 13 and 9; but the procedure is long and complex in Spain and the large number of conscientious objectors, allied to the weaknesses of the civil service, has resulted in serious discrimination. In Portugal, on the other hand, the length of time is identical in theory - four months; but the conscientious objector must undergo three months of training before beginning national service. In the Netherlands national service lasts from 12 to 15 months, civilian service 16 months. Only in Italy does civilian service last the same length of time as national service - 12 months.

This is a veritable maze, which leads to discrimination between EU citizens. But harmonization will not be easy, because of the competence of the Member States. The European Parliament is insisting, however, on the need for such harmonization, basing itself on the treaty establishing the European Union, and which the Member States have undertaken to respect. This article deals with human rights and basic freedoms.

During the debate the majority of Euro-MPs insisted that the right to refuse all forms of national service, even when limited to the performance of non-military tasks, should be accepted by all Member States. They also demanded that the length of civilian service be equal to that of national service. However, Euro-MPs were more divided on this issue, with some taking the view that it amounted to "rewarding objectors". Parliament also called for the introduction of a "European civilian service", which would allow objectors the possibility of undertaking it in another Member State than their own. It would be open to volunteers also. However, a highly controversial amendment, aimed at exempting pacifists from paying that part of their taxes which goes to meet the costs of the armed forces, was withdrawn.

MEDIA: The journalist's right to protect his sources guarantees press freedom

Euro-MPs call on all Member States to give legal recognition to confidentiality of sources.

By a very large majority of 111 to 2, with 2 abstentions, the European Parliament has called on all Member States of the European Union to recognize the legal right of journalists to protect the confidentiality of their sources of information. At present this right is recognized by law in only four countries (Denmark, Greece, Portugal and Spain); elsewhere the profession's own ground rules give the journalist the right not to disclose his or her source, but it is often disallowed by the courts.

As a result several European journalists have been arrested for refusing to disclose their sources of information, as the report of the European Parliament's vice-president, Georgios Anastassopoulos, has pointed out. The situation is particularly serious in Italy, a country characterized by numerous precedents of this nature: in fact the possibility of fresh constraints on a law that already is rarely admitted and upheld is being frequently evoked.

It is true that one sometimes has the impression that journalists are hiding behind a non-existent "source" in order to make claims which cannot be verified, thus hampering the search for the truth by the courts. Even so, this does not legitimize measures which would amount to a strong attack on press freedom.

Euro-MPs were rightly concerned over this risk; they regretted the absence of both legislative measures and a professional code of ethics adopted by bodies representing journalists and setting out the conditions for the protection of confidentiality of sources, as well as reasonable, and in any case limited, derogations from them. The report of the European Parliament stresses that the jurisprudence of the European Court of Justice regarding the implementation of the provisions of the European Human Rights convention, and Article 10 of the convention in particular, could create the conditions for a common approach, even though indirectly, as regards the protection of press freedom and journalistic confidentiality. This confidentiality, as the report adopted by the Euro-MPs makes clear, helps ensure that the information available to the citizen is better and more detailed, con-

tributes to its transparency and to the democratic strengthening of national and Community institutions, and is firmly linked to press freedom.

Although the powers of the European Commission may be very limited in this field, it shares the fears of Euro-MPs, as the Commissioner responsible for press and information, Mr. João de Deus Pinheiro, noted in his remarks to Parliament. As regards Community institutions, he added, the Council of Ministers of the European Union has decided to draw up a code of conduct which makes it possible to facilitate and improve the public's access to information and to documents relating to both Council and Commission.

NEWS: European Parliament opposes ownership concentration in the media

A majority of Euro-MPs claim it is incompatible with the pluralism of information.

After a somewhat lively debate the European Parliament adopted the Fayot-Schinzel report on the European Commission's Green Paper, "Pluralism and media concentration in the internal market", by 112 votes to 60, with two abstentions. The European Union should therefore give itself the powers needed to intervene "in case of a concentration harmful to pluralism at the European level". Euro-MPs would like the Commission to propose a directive ("European law") which seeks, on the one hand to harmonize national restrictions on media concentration and, on the other, to enable the Union to intervene in case of need. The intervention should extend to the sector as a whole - that is to say, to the press and the audiovisual industry.

The European association of newspaper editors has already expressed its opposition to this approach. It has regretted that the European Parliament should have refused to engage in a substantive discussion with the editors as they had asked. The association has likened Parliament's approach to that of a steamroller, which is indifferent to the editorial, cultural, economic and technological complexities of a sector undergoing rapid change, and which risks putting the European press in a difficult situation in relation to its competitors at the global level.

SINGLE MARKET: Are Euro-plugs and sockets on the way?

In any case, the European Commission is not drafting legislation in this field.

Will electrical plugs and sockets made to European standards come on the market shortly? In any event, the European Commission is not drafting a "law" covering them, contrary to what has been rumoured. This was made abundantly clear by a Commission spokesperson on January 19.

Currently there are no "European laws" in this field. The European Union leaves it to manufacturers to set their own standards, if they so desire. All that is required of the Twelve is that they accept products made in other EU countries and meet safety requirements - such as the need for a third wire to ground certain electrical appliances.

However, manufacturers, consumer organizations and the European Parliament would like harmonization at the EU level. British plug and socket manufacturers, on the other hand, are against this, given that their products differ from those in use on the Continent.

So far the European committee responsible for electrotechnical standardization (CENELEC), which brings together experts from the 12 EU as well as other European countries, has taken the view that harmonization is unnecessary, as the problem is easily solved by using an adapter. CENELEC may review its stand during its forthcoming annual general meeting in June.

At the same time the British government has sent the European Commission the draft of a UK law conferring legality on the plugs and sockets used nationally. The Commission believes the law in question would complicate matters, given that the need for "European laws" is felt most strongly when there are divergent national laws.

INFLATION: A slight rise in December ...

... but the 3.3% recorded last year is the lowest since 1987.

The annual rate of inflation rose slightly in the European Union last December, when it reached 3.3%, as compared to 3.2% in November, according to Eurostat, the EU's statistical office. However, the December figure is the lowest recorded in any calendar year in the EU since 1987.

During 1993 differences in inflation rates in the 12 EU countries narrowed, while inflation rose in only three Member States: Belgium, France and Luxembourg. Denmark and Ireland recorded the lowest rate - 1.5% - and Greece the highest - 12.1%, even if it is considerably lower than the 14.3% recorded in 1992. Inflation remained low in the Netherlands - 1.7% - and Britain - 1.9%. The level of inflation was below the average with 3.6%, along with Belgium - 2.7%. Luxembourg was above the average with 3.6%, along with Germany (West) - 3.7%, Italy - 4.4%, Spain - 4.9% and Portugal - 6.4%.

AGRICULTURE: A 50% fall in employment in 20 years

Farm families account for just under four-fifths of farm labour.

Between 1973 and 1993 agricultural employment in the 12-nation European Union (excluding the former East Germany) fell by half, according to Eurostat, the EU's statistical office. The number of annual work units (AWU) dropped from 14.5 million to 7.5 million; given the high proportion of part-time employment in agriculture, employment is calculated in AWUs, which are equal to full-time employment. Italy has the lion's share - 26.7% - of agricultural employment in the European Union; it is well ahead of Spain (16%) and France (15.1%).

In 1993 as much as 79% of agricultural labour was provided by family members, as compared to 79.2% in 1973. Jobs held by family members account for more than 80% of the total agricultural labour input in eight of the 12 EU countries, reaching a peak in Greece with 92.5%. The share of jobs held by others - whether salaried or not - exceeds 25% in Britain, Denmark, Italy and the Netherlands.