

Week of January 4 to 9

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EXTERNAL RELATIONS : European aid to the Polish people

For months prior to the current turmoil, the Polish public has been in a difficult and painful situation due to an inadequate and irregular supply of basic commodities. This situation has been particularly dramatic for some of the most vulnerable segments of the population, such as the sick, large families or those with young children, and has been aggravated following the developments that began on December 13.

The Soviet Union has sought to ease public discontent by sending large quantities of foodstuffs to Poland. But as a result of the significant internal food shortages faced by the Soviet Union, it is likely that its aid may be limited. In addition, the freeing of prices decreed in Poland since the beginning of the year, which have resulted in an increase in prices of some 300 to 400 percent, is not destined to improve the lot of a population already severely put to the test. During the course of 1981, the European Community on three different occasions had supplied agricultural products to Poland at prices that were about 15 percent below those in effect on the world markets. In December, it also agreed to a gift of 8000 tonnes of meat having been assured by the Polish authorities that the goods would be distributed to the civilian population. The means of transportation for this meat, in the form of carcasses to be cut on the spot, had to be looked after by the Polish authorities themselves.

The total cost of this operation up to now has amounted to more than £ 60 million for the European Community. A new segment of aid has also just been decided upon amounting to £ 1 million.

This aid will be for products such as medicine, whole powdered milk, flour, oil, baby food, soap and other necessities. The shipments will be distributed through intermediary agencies specialised in humanitarian action, such as the International Red Cross, Caritas or Doctors Without Frontiers. The Foreign Ministers of the 10 European Community countries meeting in Brussels on January 4 agreed on the need to continue food aid despite political conditions they do not approve of in Poland. But, on the other hand, their position was less pronounced in connection with the possibility of making financial aid available to Poland during the existing situation. The Ministers nevertheless declared they would study what could be done to ease the plight of Poles outside their country who don't wish to return under existing circumstances.

INCOME : Gains are few and far between

The economic situation has undoubtedly replaced the weather as the most active topic of conversation for most of us. The amount of rain or sunshine is a suitable topic when the economic climate is favourable but is dislodged by the clouds of unemployment and recession coming over the horizon.

And of all the economic indexes examined by the experts, none is probably of greater concern to the average citizen than the gauge of real personal income. This calculates the amount a household received in its regular pay packet.

Surveys recently released by the European Commission in Brussels indicate that in all but two of the 10 European Community member countries the past year was not an especially pleasant one for the family bank account. The tables for household incomes after inflation has been taken into consideration show increases from 1981 over 1980 only in Denmark and France. And in the case of Denmark, the increase was a slight one. All other countries showed a decline in income, including fairly sharp drops of 3 percent or more in Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The Federal Republic of Germany and Greece experienced only fractional drops of 0.4 percent and 0.8 percent over the period, according to these figures.

For some of the countries, however, 1981 represented a radical change from the previous year's performance. For instance, real household income in Belgium went from an increase of 2.3 percent in 1980 to a drop of 1.2 percent in 1981, in the Federal Republic of Germany from a rise of 2 percent to a slight drop of 0.4 percent, in the Netherlands from a substantial rise of 6 percent to a decline of 3.6 percent and in the United Kingdom from an increase of 3.1 percent to a drop of 3 percent. The only improvements were noted in the two states showing a positive result in 1981, Denmark and France. Denmark went from a 4 percent drop in 1980 to a 0.7 percent increase in 1981 and France went from a drop of 0.7 percent to an increase of 1.9 percent.

A closely related economic indicator, the index of private consumption, also showed drops in most of the European Community member countries. Most registered declines of around 1 percent, with the exception of the Netherlands where it amounted to 3.3 percent, Greece, France and Luxembourg also noted small gains in spending.

RETIREMENT : Flexible retirement gains ground

Voluntary early retirement schemes, longer holidays and shorter working-hours for people approaching retirement age will ease the shock of retiring and help the unemployed, according to the European Commission.

The claim comes after nearly two years study of proposals on how to introduce "flexible retirement" in Europe. The European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and Commission officials have all called for workers to be given the right to choose when to retire after a certain age, and for the introduction of "gradual retirement" schemes.

Community governments are now under pressure to implement some of these ideas, given the growing pressures of unemployment at home, and the concrete nature of proposals contained in the recommendation recently submitted to them by the Commission.

The Commission plan will involve major changes in national laws relating to the age at which workers become eligible for pensions. It wants workers of both sexes to be completely free to choose when to retire after a certain age. That means that alternative formulae which take into account the number of years worked, the age of retirement and the level of pension to be paid, will have to be worked out.

Compensatory benefits for people undergoing gradual retirement with longer holidays and shorter working hours will also have to be calculated. And laws which limit pensioners earnings from part-time work will need extensive revision.

Financial incentives to encourage early retirement will also have to be thought out. People taking gradual early retirement will maintain their pension rights and get compensatory benefits, but extra financial incentives are only acceptable in extreme economic circumstances and should not be regarded as an integral part of the flexible retirement system, according to the Commission.

The recommendation allows two years for member states to assess the implications of implementing the proposed changes. If it is accepted by the Council, ministers will be expected to report back their findings in mid-1984.

Flexible retirement is expected in the short term to particularly benefit declining industries like steel and fishing. Experiments in the UK, France and Sweden have already shown this to be the case. But the whole working population of Europe will eventually benefit from a system which replaces the brutal psychological shock of being employed one day and unemployed the next, by a gentle transition period from full-time activity to complete idleness.

SOCIAL : Improving part-time working conditions

Part-time work, particularly for women, is becoming increasingly popular in the European Community. In some EEC states, the demand for part-time work exceeds the supply of vacancies by a much larger proportion than the excess demand for full-time jobs in the labour market as a whole. Almost 9 % of the Community labour force is currently working on a part-time basis. Approximately 90 % of these part-timers are women.

The rapid expansion of the part-time phenomenon is undoubtedly because it is attractive to both employers and workers. The flexibility offered by part-time work can help firms to utilise capacity and skills more efficiently. Workers, especially women with families, also enjoy the relative freedom offered by part-time work.

The growth of part-time work has, however, raised certain problems. Part-time workers are often discriminated against by employers as regards their legal status and are subjected to poorer employment and working conditions. They are also at a disadvantage in terms of attitudes to their place in the working market.

As most part-time work is unskilled, there is a tendency in some EEC Member States to associate this kind of work with insecure forms of employment such as temporary contracts with private employment agencies or short fixed-term contracts. State-subsidised job creation measures also result in part-time jobs.

Part-timers also often receive inadequate cover against unemployment, restricted access to pension schemes, etc. Their prospects for promotion and training are also limited and they face discrimination in salaries, fringe benefits and premia.

The need for Community action in this sector was recognised in 1979 when the EEC Ministers stressed that part-time work had become a real factor in the labour market but that it was necessary to clarify the conditions under which it was carried out.

In a report published in Brussels recently, the European Commission emphasises that legislation is required to deal with the problem of part-time work. The purpose of such a measure would be to guarantee part-timers the same rights as full-time workers and to make part-time work a viable and attractive alternative for many workers.

The proposed directive will also, according to the Commission, set out rights with regard to remuneration, holiday payments, redundancy and retirement payments for part-time workers. Finally, the directive will promote in the context of equal treatment, in the longer term, a movement away from the present situation where part-time work is primarily the preserve of women.

MEDICINES : Ground rules for imports of pharmaceutical supplies

One of the most noticeable and alarming trends in the health field in recent years has been the dramatic increase in the amount of drugs, medicines and pharmaceutical products consumed by the European public.

On the one hand, the development and distribution of many new and improved products has considerably bettered the general health of the population. But on the other hand, over-consumption and even abuse of such products have harmful side-effects on the individual.

Authorities have therefore to walk a tightrope between encouraging research and innovation into new and beneficial products and the protection of the millions of consumers within their jurisdiction. Generally, each country has a system of safety inspection which seeks to assure that products sold on the domestic market are useful and safe. Sometimes, such rules also act as a deterrent to imports from other countries which may be just as good or better than the goods sold on the home market, a practice that shields domestic producers from outside competition but which unduly penalises the consumer by preventing the sale of better or cheaper foreign goods.

This international trade is an example of one of the biggest headaches faced by European Community authorities in Brussels as they try to put into practice the Community principle of freedom of trade between the 10 member states. There have been a number of decisions in the European Court of Justice ruling that, in general, products of any type which have been cleared for sale in one Community member country may in turn be sold in another. But differences in national safety, health, environmental or consumer laws still restrict the application of these Community rules on free movement.

The European Commission in Brussels in 1980 had proposed a new law seeking to improve the system of parallel imports of proprietary medicinal products for which marketing authorizations have already been granted.

This would have opened up the Community market in this field and expanded opportunities for both manufacturers and consumers. But a number of objections were raised and a few months ago the European Parliament actually rejected the measure.

As a result, the European Commission has just issued a new set of policy guidelines in this field to replace the proposed new law. These ask the national Governments to ensure that their domestic regulations be strictly necessary from the health standpoint, that they obstruct intro-Community trade as little as possible and that they adopt an active and vigilant attitude towards pharmaceutical companies. The Community authorities will also continue to work towards greater international cooperation and information in this important economic and health sector.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN BY 1985 ?

The task of achieving equal treatment and equal opportunities for men and women in society, and particularly in employment, is inevitably long and complex. The last ten years have seen significant progress in this area. It is said, for instance, that today's youth takes equality of treatment for girls and boys for granted.

Perhaps ... but a glance at certain legal, parliamentary and tax provisions reveal that equal treatment for men and women is still not a fact of every day life in EEC countries. One look at the political scene shows that Europe's public life continues to be dominated by men. The struggle for equal treatment is therefore far from over. A great deal remains to be done.

The European Community has been in the forefront of the struggle for equality between men and women for several years now. Community action in this field began in the early 1960s with studies, conferences and recommendations on the progress achieved in the Member States in the implementation of Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome concerning equal pay for men and women.

A major step forward was taken in 1974 when European ministers expressed the political will to achieve equality between men and women as regards access to employment, training and conditions of employment. The programme was translated into action by the adoption of three complementary directives. The first of these, adopted on February 10, 1975, concerned the principle of equal pay for men and women : the second, on the equality of treatment as regards access to employment, was adopted on February 9, 1976, the third, concerning equal treatment in social security benefits, was adopted on December 19, 1978.

These legal instruments have played a major role in stimulating action by the Member States and the adoption of national legislation in this field. Recent surveys show, however, that the directives are not applied uniformly in all EEC states.

The Community's financial instruments, especially the European Social Fund, have contributed to professional training programmes designed to make it easier for women to get jobs in areas where they have been traditionally under-represented. But, once again, statistics show that good intentions are not enough. Today, women are the major victims of rocketing unemployment in Europe. The introduction of new technologies, allowing for the introduction of labour-saving techniques in offices and shops - where women workers are in the majority - is one of the reasons for the increase in female unemployment.

In response to an appeal launched by the European Parliament in February 1981, the European Commission decided to reinforce and enlarge its activities in favour of women. A new programme of action, covering the period 1982 to 1985, was announced recently by Ivor Richard, European Commissioner for employment, social affairs and education.

The programme covers 16 concrete proposals which are divided into two wide-ranging chapters : reinforcement of the rights of the individual as a way of achieving equal treatment, and the achievement of equal opportunities in practice. The first chapter is designed essentially to extend and guarantee the application of the three existing directives, particularly by introducing the possibility of recourse to infringement procedures. The Commission wants to clarify certain legal notions such as indirect discrimination which are still unfamiliar and to identify the implications of the directives for other areas of law such as civil, commercial and fiscal law, where some of the concepts no longer relate to present circumstances (for instance, the idea that men are responsible for the subsistence of their families).

Other actions are designed to improve the living and working conditions of women. These include the extension of opportunities for leave from work, particularly parental leave and leave for family reasons, and the protection of women during pregnancy and early motherhood. The objective is to allow for a better division of parental responsibilities, and to prevent discrimination on a professional level.

The second set of actions concern the elimination of non-legal obstacles to equal opportunities, in particular the constraints and conditioning of attitudes based on the traditional segregation of roles in society. Based to some extent on the measures introduced in the United States and the Scandinavian countries, the Commission is in favour of launching programmes in such areas as information, professional training (including within firms), and integration into working-life.

Efforts aimed at encouraging women to take up non-traditional jobs will be made at the school-going stage, by informing girls of different employment opportunities offered to them.

Finally, specific action will be taken in favour of migrant women, who are often doubly handicapped when it comes to access to employment. In addition, the European Commission is also determined to set a good example in this area by eliminating any discrimination that might exist as regards its own male and female personnel.