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INVESTMENTS: Bank help for small firms

The European Investment Bank has launched a 136 million pounds bid to help hard-pressed small and medium sized enterprises in France and Italy. The funds, the bulk of which will go to Italy, come from Europe's New Community Instrument for long term loan finance and will be made available to firms through local banks and financial intermediaries.

Small and medium sized firms employing less than 500 people currently account for about 95 percent of all registered companies in the European Community and have been particularly hard hit by the recession and high interest rates. Bankruptcies have been increasing at a nearly unprecedented rate. In the Netherlands last year they rose by a massive 42 percent on 1980. In the Federal Republic of Germany, traditionally Europe's strongest industrial economy, they increased by 27.4 percent, in the United Kingdom by 26.4 percent, in France by 20.3 percent and in Belgium by 15.8 percent. Even worse figures have been recorded for the first half of this year and a post-war record is expected.

The new European Investment Bank loans, 116 million pounds to Italy and 21 million pounds to France, are part of a concerted response by the European Community's financial institutions to stem the tide.

Last year the Bank made 860 loans worth 158 million pounds to small and medium sized enterprises, from its own resources. Compared to the previous year, this represented a sevenfold increase in the number of loans and a fivefold increase in the amount of cash granted.

In coming years the Bank is expected to channel more and more loans like the French and Italian ones from New Community Instrument funds into the sector. Under the system, which has operated since 1979, the money is raised by the European Commission and the loans made and administered by the Bank.

Other Community institutions, including the European Parliament and the European Commission are also stepping up their support for so-called SME's, with proposals for a "Year of small and medium sized companies and craft trades" in 1983 and a conference on the problems they face, planned for Brussels in January.

COOPERATIVES: Workers of the world unite

The cooperative movement is about to get new impetus from the European Community.

In recent months, both the European Commission and the European Parliament have examined the cooperative movement and seen it as offering potential for economic and employment improvement.

At a recent meeting in Brussels, several major European cooperative groups in specific sectors decided to work together at the European Community level through a new organ to be known as the "Coordination Committee of Cooperative Associations of the European Community".

The founding organisations in the new venture include the COGECA, representing agricultural cooperatives; EUROCOOP, involving consumer cooperatives; GCEC, concerned with cooperative banks and UGAL, a group composed of retail and service cooperatives. The Coordination Committee will be open to all cooperative associations working at the Community level. The objective of this new institution is to reinforce the collaboration between these organisations in order to obtain the maximum benefits to the common interests of cooperatives.

A main incentive for this new cooperation has been the encouragement of the Commission and Parliament which recently began examining the role and the importance of the cooperative movement.

These organisations take various forms and have varying objectives, but in general they are an expression of the desire of their members to join together for their mutual benefit. They are common in the agricultural field, where dairy and other farmers may organise a joint entity to process, market or otherwise commercialise their produce. Consumer, banking and other types of cooperatives have also been popular over the years. But in recent times, they were primarily regarded as having more limited local roles to play.

However, in recent months, Ivor Richard, Commissioner for Social and Employment Affairs, has also stressed the untapped potential of these organisations. For instance, he told the Ministerial meeting of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in Paris in March that "We have been looking in the Commission at the development of cooperatives, especially worker cooperatives, and more broadly at what has been described as local employment creation initiatives". He added that an effort would be made to use the Community Social Fund to assist such efforts. "We cannot fail to be impressed by the drive, enthusiasm and dedication of those involved in what can be genuinely described as a new social movement".

ENLARGEMENT: Industrial trade fears in Southern Mediterranean

The European Community's southward enlargement to include Spain and Portugal is expected to have wide-ranging repercussions on its trade in farm products and industrial manufactures with the other countries of the Mediterranean region.

Although the impact of enlargement on trade in the farm sector - on European imports of Tunisian and Moroccan wine, olive oil or tomatoes, for instance - has been discussed publicly in some detail, very little has been said about how the expansion of the Community will affect trade in the crucial industrial sector.

The Southern Mediterranean countries, ranging from Morocco to Jordan, are rapidly stepping up their production and exports of industrial manufactures. The emphasis has been on textiles, footwear, chemicals and steel production also seems to be developing.

All twelve countries in the Southern Mediterranean are major trading partners for the Community. Although they account for a relatively small proportion of the Community's imports from the rest of the world (5.7% in 1980), all twelve states are a major outlet for European exports (10% in 1980).

All of the countries have expressed fears at the prospect of EC enlargement, essentially because they fear that their place on European markets could be taken up by Spain and Portugal.

A recent paper drawn up by European Commission experts studies the future of trade between the Community and the Southern Mediterranean states in the different industrial sectors once Spain and Portugal join the Common Market. Commission officials say that no immediate problems are likely in either the footwear or chemical sectors, because the Community does not face real difficulties in this area and because trade in these products is still quite low. Problems could arise, however, if these countries of the Southern Mediterranean were to develop their industry very rapidly and concentrate exclusively on exports.

The situation is quite different for textiles where trade expansion will be difficult because of the crisis facing Europe's textile industry.

The report stresses that once Spain and Portugal join the Community they will in fact open their markets to goods from outside. This means that the Southern Mediterranean states will be able to sell more in these two countries. They should also try to step up exports to Arab and African markets, in addition to their traditional outlets in Europe, says the study.

PARLIAMENT: European Parliament fights for human rights

Since the signing of the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference on security and cooperation, human rights issues have been paradoxically less and less talked about in Europe. The European Parliament is very worried about what it sees as the increase in human rights violations in Europe. Three proposals on the subject have been tabled, in November, by three groups of MEP's.

The first one, tabled by two socialist MEP's, Marijke Van Hemeldonck and Phili Viehoff, condemns the recent prison sentences imposed on Czech intellectuals and signatories of "Charter 77". It says it is particularly concerned with the arrest of Ivan Jirous, a former artistic and cultural director, accused of editing a non-official paper, and recently condemned to a long prison sentence. The arrests and subsequent sentences contradict the Helsinki Final Act, which guarantees freedom of expression, says the motion.

The second proposal expresses concern over the situation of the 400.000 members of the Greek minority living in Albania, who are currently deprived by the Albanian government of freedom of religious expression. The Albanian authorities have also forbidden the Greek language to be taught in schools and universities. The parliamentary motion calls on the Albanian government to restore freedom of religion by permitting churches to be reopened and services held again.

The last government to be condemned by the European Parliament is Ankara, which according to another parliamentary proposal, is obstructing an inquiry requested by the United Nations into the fate of persons missing since the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in June 1974. There are strong indications that people reported missing are still being held either by the Turkish authorities or by the Turkish forces occupying Cyprus, says the motion, proposed by Greek communist MEP Leonidas Kyrkos.

The Parliament has always condemned similar practices, which constitute a flagrant violation of the humane and other fundamental principles expressed in the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference.

JOBS: Where are they going?

Today the European Community member countries have more than 11.5 million unemployed and entire sectors of their economies are crumbling. Two French members of the European Parliament, Pierre-Bernard Cousté of the European Progressive Democratic Party, and Guy Fernandez of the Communist Party, have asked the European Commission to indicate the number of jobs lost in particular industries.

At the top of the list is the steel industry in Europe which registered a 5.3 percent fall in its work force between July 1981 and July 1982. The worst hit was the British steel industry which lost 11.7 percent of its workers, or about 11,000 jobs in one year. The German steel industry also lost some 11,000 jobs, representing about 5.6 percent.

Apart from the steel industry, the industrial sectors which experienced the most drastic cut in manpower were the traditional ones, involving the processing of raw materials such as metal working, textiles, footwear, clothing and the automobile industry, which have all lost something between 4 and 6 percent of their work force in the last 12 months.

The United Kingdom registered the largest percentage drop in industrial jobs, a fall of 19 percent on the 1978 level. It was also noted that between 1980 and 1981, the number of jobs in the service sector declined by 2.7 percent.

Overall there has been a 10 percent drop in jobs in Europe since 1978. On the other hand, there has been a slight increase in the number of jobs in the service sector, except in the United Kingdom. These figures are based on EC member state estimates.

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HEALTH: Radioactive strawberries?

Worried that your romantic candle-lit dinner will be ruined by a fluorescent glow given off by the strawberries? Or that future children may sprout additional limbs because of radioactive onions? Don't be!

At the request of a Member of the European Parliament, the European Commission has been looking into the practice of giving food a shot of radiation before it arrives in the shops, in order to stop the bacteria getting to it before you do.

Apparently safety measures to protect, both workers using the dangerous cobalt 40 and caesium 137 irradiators, and the general consuming public, are in force throughout the European Community under a Euratom Directive.

But Commission officials agree with German Socialist MEP Gerhard Schmid, that food products treated with radiation should be labelled to tell the consumer exactly what he's eating.

Radiation treatment of food is currently biggest in Belgium, where it is allowed for strawberries, onions, garlic, shallots, paprika, peppers and potatoes. In the Netherlands it is used for potatoes, onions, mushrooms and poultrymeat; in France for onions, garlic and shallots and in Italy for potatoes, onions and garlic. In Germany, Britain and Denmark it is banned in principle, but irradiation equipment does exist.

RELIGION: St. Francis of Assisi

St. Francis of Assisi's eight hundredth birthday has been celebrated in the little Italian town of Gubbio with an international seminar on world peace and the environment.

Drawing its title "Terra Mater" or "Mother Earth" from the Saint's own prayer, the conference brought together conservationist groups from all over Europe, showing that Franciscan ideas of living at one with nature are again gaining popularity. Groups represented included the European Environmental Bureau and Italia Nostra.

The growing importance of environmental issues and the rise of "green" ecology parties in European politics looks like making the Franciscan philosophy increasingly relevant in the future. At the Gubbio seminar subjects of contemporary concern, including environmental protection, disarmament, international cooperation and the divide between the countries of the rich "North" and the poor "South", were discussed.

REFUGEES: New EEC aid

The European Community has allocated about 19 million pounds from its emergency aid programme to help refugees. Much of it will go towards helping people made homeless by events in Afghanistan, Southeast Asia, Central America and Southern Africa.

The Commission proposed the emergency aid programme to the Council of Ministers in June.

Representatives of the non-governmental aid organisations, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the International Red Cross and the League of Red Cross Societies, then met in Geneva to coordinate aid distribution.

£5.48 million will go to refugees in Southeast Asia, £5.48 million to refugees from Afghanistan in Pakistan, £5.48 million to Central America and £2.74 million to refugees in Angola.

EQUAL RIGHTS: Male midwives

Equal rights for men and women is something that no politician can afford to ignore these days, particularly in the discrimination-conscious confines of the European Community.

Now British Socialist MEP Roland Boyes is doing his bit for the cause with a major blow for male rights.

He says that men who want to become midwives in the United Kingdom are effectively discriminated against because there are only two hospitals in Britain that are prepared to train them.

Training in midwifery is now the same throughout Europe and in 1983 midwives will be allowed to work in any Community country.

European Commission officials have told Mr. Boyes that the European Court of Justice is looking into the legal ramifications of the case and will report its conclusions ... hopefully before the 1984 European elections!