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Mailed from Brussels X

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SOCIETY: Parental leave on track

Social partners have signed a European framework agreement on the minimum conditions of leave for 'force majeure' family reasons

A newborn is a bundle of joy, but leaving aside all the rhetoric and feelings, in a stressed industrialized society, it can bring problems: how can the demands of a baby be reconciled with work commitments; how can the balance between family and professional life be maintained and how can equal opportunities between men and women be promoted? It should not be forgotten that men are as much involved as women in the birth of a child, as well as caring for it and giving it all the emotional support it needs.

Without wanting to pretend that such a vast issue can be solved overnight, a big step forward was made with the signing on 14 December 1995 of the first ever European framework agreement on parental leave between representatives of the European Trade Unions Confederation (ETUC), UNICE (the European employer's association) and the CEEP (public companies) in the presence of Pádraig Flynn, European Social Affairs Commissioner.

Under this pact, the ETUC, UNICE and CEEP wanted to draw up minimum conditions on parental leave and absences from work for 'force majeure' family reasons. They asked the European Commission to submit the framework agreement directly to the Council of Ministers for them to set legally binding minimum standards, except for the United Kingdom. The ETUC hopes, however, that trade unions and British employers can negotiate the implementation of this agreement on a voluntary basis.

All three organizations - UNICE, CEEP and the ETUC - want the Commission to control their pact and the Council of Ministers to make it compulsory. They say

that the Commission should withdraw its proposal entirely should Ministers attempt to modify its content in any way.

Both EU-President Jacques Santer and Commissioner Flynn say that the agreement is 'historic'. "It is a striking example of the implementation of the new rules agreed at Maastricht, which allow social partners to guide European legislation in the fields it is most concerned about".

The agreement applies to all workers, both men and women, with a contract or working relationship defined by legislation, collective conventions or practices in each member state. It guarantees for workers of all member states (except the United Kingdom), whatever their sex, parental leave to care for their child, whether natural or adopted "for a minimum of three months up to a determined age which could be up to eight years, to be defined by member states and/or the social partners". The latter can decide whether full or part-time parental leave is to be given or in the form of credit-time where a period of leave can be given after a certain time in the job, but not more than a year. Member states and social partners should also take the necessary measures to protect workers against dismissal for having requested or received parental leave and to ensure their social security protection over this period. And the worker should have the right to take up his/her former post or an equivalent or similar post.

The pact is not restricted to newborns or an adopted child since member states and/or social partners can take 'force majeure' measures for family reasons, like accidents.

14 December 1995 will thus go down as a milestone in European social legislation.

TRANSPORT: How to break the vicious circle of the railways ...

... and better coordinate Europe's different modes of transport.

Travel 1000 kilometres in less than four hours without stepping on a plane, no matter where you are in the European Union - that's the ambition for the coming years set out by European Transport Commissioner Neil Kinnock. Mr. Kinnock presided over two working groups or 'task forces' which met for the first time mid-December - one over preparing for the train of the future and the other boosting coordination between the various modes of transport. Representatives from transport firms, users and trade unions also participated in the meetings.

At a time when pollution and the difficulties of road travel are constantly criticized, rail transport seems faced with something of a paradox: it only accounts for 15% of passengers in the European Union and 10% of freight. Furthermore, it has the label of being a costly and rather restrictive way of travelling. The European Commission's train of the future is a '50% train': 50% cheaper for users, 50% cheaper to run and with 50% more passengers and freight.

And as governments give more priority to personal modes of transport, notably the car, the cost of rail transport appears to be increasing. To bring down costs, rolling stock, equipment, signalling and stations themselves are made to last as long as possible, the exception being the 'Train à Grande Vitesse' (TGV). The result is a vicious circle: railways have an even more outdated image, attracting even fewer passengers, making them even costlier to run, etc.

The working group on the train of the future sets out to encourage research and technological development. EU member states have already pledged around one billion ECU* for 1995-1998, to be coordinated with 100 million ECU from the EU's Science and Technology Framework Programme budget 1994-1998.

The working group wants to have a clear idea of the problems it is facing at the outset, of the needs, plans and projects already under way of the 15 member states. Then it will look at how the national research projects and European projects can be coordinated. The Commission feels that the new generation of railways can be better and more cheaply developed through coordinated EU efforts rather than individual financing from EU member states. Such 'flag' projects will make it easier for European companies to sell their ideas and hardware throughout the world.

The use of new information technology will also have a place in tomorrow's means of transport, increasing consumer choice. The Commission envisages an 'Intelligent User Ticket', a ticket enabling a single journey with different means of transport. It would be valid for train, bus and boat alike.

The 'inter-mode' travel working group will look at how to coordinate various methods of transport. The Commission wants to see the coordination of projects and investment to improve the change over time between different modes of transport, including the big conurbations - an initiative which not only concerns long-distance travel, but also urban hops.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.85 or IR£0.83.

HEALTH: Better protection against X-rays

The European Commission proposes strengthening Community legislation.

Although the European Union has little right to legislate in the field of public health, it has more to say on the individual health of EU citizens.

It is not the first time that the EU has dealt with the matter. In 1984, the Council of Ministers adopted a directive based in the Euratom Treaty to guarantee workers and the population in general protection against the dangers of ion rays.

Now, for a number of reasons, the Commission wants to update this legislation as the use of ion rays in medicine is continuing to evolve. Based on estimates by the United Nations Scientific Committee, the inhabitants of industrialized countries are subject on average to one radiological or nuclear-type examination per year. Medicine is by far the most common means of exposure to X-rays.

Progress in science and technology are encompassed in the updated directive and quality assurance added. The coverage of the directive has also been widened to include screenings, pregnant women and unpaid persons.

SOCIETY: Young graduates caught between unemployment, over-qualification and precarious jobs

Results of a Eurostat study on education and employment (Contd.).

Usually, Europeans with higher education qualifications can find work more easily, but this is not the case for young people nowadays. A newly published study by Eurostat, the European Union's statistical office, says that 11.5% of young graduates were unemployed in 1994 - slightly above the figure for the public at large. Furthermore, even if they are employed, it is often in an insecure job for which they are overqualified.

In 1994, in the former 12 EU member states, 19.3% of higher education graduates between the ages of 25 and 29 were on short-term work contracts counting as 'precarious' employment. This dropped to 10.2% for secondary school leavers and 15.6% for those with a basic education. Young graduates in Spain (47%), Italy and Portugal (over 27%) were most affected by the phenomenon, and Luxembourg, the United Kingdom and Ireland the least, at less than 10%.

As for being over-qualified for a job, in 1994 in the EU's former 12 member states, nearly 14% of university graduates aged between 25 and 34 were in administrative jobs, 6% in the service industries or sales people and around 6% were in manual or skilled labour. For those over 35, these figures fell respectively to 9%, 4% and 5%. Overall, one in four higher education graduates was unable to find work matching his/her level of qualifications and was forced to take work below his/her capabilities.

One final finding: In all the former EU countries but Portugal, those with a higher level of education are benefitting from retraining schemes originally conceived to give those who failed in education first time around a second chance.

EASTERN EUROPE: High cost for CAP

The European Commission has produced a study.

As Eastern and Central European nations set their sights on EU membership early in the next millennium, a new key European Commission study looks at the strains at bringing the farm-based economies of Eastern and Central Europe into the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), one of the EU pillars.

The European Commission is already getting down to thinking what will be required of the 10 countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEECs) lined up for membership on the political, economic and institutional front.

At their meeting in Essen, Germany, in December 1994, EU heads of government and state spelled out that 'agricultural is a key element in the pre-membership strategy'.

Many Eastern European nations are mainly dependent on their agricultural economies and integration into the EU's CAP could take a huge chunk out of the EU budget. Cost estimates done by EU experts on the basis of alignment of farm prices to those of the EU, an increase in production based on unchanging demand and unchanged CAP rules between now and then are telling. Membership of the 10 CEECs would add 100 million consumers to the EU markets and

double the agricultural work force (put at around 6.6 million people for the 15 member states in the year 2000) and increase cultivated areas to 200 million hectares.

They estimate that it would cost the EU an extra 9 billion ECU* per year to bring the 10 CEECs in the European Union from the year 2000 and 12 billion ECU from 2010 (compared to 42 billion for the EU's 15 member states), including full payment of aid for certain arable crops, premiums for animal rearing as well as so-called 'accompanying measures'.

And these figures do not include those measures adopted by the EU in 1992 to compensate EU farmers for price reductions which would rightfully also be due to the 10 CEECs. The Commission has already stated that rather than allocating this additional aid, it would be better to give funds nationally for rural development and environmental protection projects.

It seems that the European Union will have to have a serious re-think of its own agricultural policy once more and the CEECs themselves overhaul their own agriculture before becoming members of the EU.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.85 or IR£0.83.