

INFORMATION

SOCIAL POLICY

JOINT COMMITTEE ORGANISATION IN COMMUNITY INDUSTRIES

33/72

The structure takes shape

In anything as real and dynamic as the European Community, structures are not laid down once and for all.

The growth of the Common Market, in fact, necessitates adjustment of the instruments to the objective, in function of the needs of the time.

On the economic side, a new instrument was brought into existence in 1964, in order to facilitate the harmonisation of the policies followed by the member countries. This was the medium-term economic policy committee, for which the Treaty made no provision, but which has become an essential cog in the Community machine.

A similar adaptation was carried out on the social side. When the heads of State and governments laid down as a Community objective the formation of an economic and monetary union, which goes far beyond the mere operation of the Common Market, they were careful to emphasise that social progress is not the automatic result of economic progress, but must be kept consistently in the foreground and the importance recognised of ensuring the best possible working conditions for everybody.

Once the customs barriers had been lowered, human factors were bound to come more decisively into the middle of the picture. The Permanent Employment Committee was formed in 1971; and in this both sides of industry, and government representatives, examine the means for improving the mobility of workers, both from place to place and from industry to industry.

This, however, was a generalised approach; and it was no substitute for an examination of the same problems on a more detailed scale -- i.e. in relation

to the main sectors of economic activity.

The logic of integration is in fact unavoidable. As the obstacles to competition disappear, and as joint policies develop in individual sectors and industries, a concerted approach by the social partners becomes not only desirable, but indispensable.

There is nothing new in the principle. It has been applied on several occasions in the past, whether at the level of firms, of regions or of nations. The formation of the European Communities had enlarged the fields of economic activity; and it was foreseeable that the dialogue between the two sides of industry would also graduate to the Community level. Harmonised conditions of competition call for correspondingly harmonised conditions of work. Accordingly, a series of mixed committees were formed on a joint basis, for the purpose of reviewing social problems in specific industries.

The existing mixed committees

The first two industrial joint committees were formed in the coal and steel industry, the integration of which came under the Treaty of Paris setting up the E.C.S.C.

They were formed in 1955 on the initiative of the High Authority. Their assignment is to ascertain the facts about conditions of work, compile lists of existing disparities and study the means by which progress can be facilitated in their harmonisation. Later, in 1965, committees of the same type were formed in these two basic industries to deal with problems relating to non-manual workers.

Further joint committees have been formed, by decision of the European Commission, for industry in the European Economic Community (Common Market) formed under the Treaty of Rome.

This was the starting point for a dialogue on social problems relating to wage-earners in agriculture (1963), road transport (1967), waterway navigation (1967), sea fisheries (1968) and the railways (1972). Meetings were also held in 1971 between both sides of the building and construction industries.

The European Commission puts material facilities at the disposal of the social partners, including the organisation of meetings, the provision of

secretarial facilities and documentation; and, when the social partners so request, its representatives may act as chairmen of the committees, or of their working parties.

Very appreciable results have already been secured. In coal and steel the study of working conditions has passed beyond the list-making stage. Recommendations have been drawn up for the attention of governments and the Commission.

In the steel industry, the workers' representatives have proposed discussing the possibility of a framework agreement on the harmonisation of working conditions, and the employers have stated the conditions on which they would be willing to take part in such a discussion.

The road transport and waterway navigation committees have issued opinions on various problems, such as the length of driving time, daily stops and rest periods, the composition of crews, overtime and paid holidays. These opinions are being used by the Commission in drawing up proposals to the Council for the relevant regulations.

Collaboration between the two sides in the Agriculture Committee made it possible to negotiate two agreements at the Community level, relating to working hours in agriculture and in stock-raising. The Committee for the sea fisheries has issued a number of opinions and set in motion direct negotiations between employers and workers for harmonising working conditions on the basis of a project submitted by the workers.

Joint committees as an instrument in economic and social programming.

The experience of the first mixed committees has been positive; and the Commission favours the strengthening and intensification of the dialogue between the two sides of industry.

This cooperation is developing in a spirit of great freedom. Though the Commission intervenes to convince the two sides of the usefulness of permanent contacts at the European level, it does not undertake any directive role. The part it plays is limited to coordination and to recalling, if necessary, that the concerted approach in each industry must conform to the main lines of the Community's economic and social policy.

It may be asked whether the work of these committees may lead, in the foreseeable future, to European collective agreements. The reply depends on the social partners themselves; but it is important to emphasise that the making of such agreements is not a foreordained condition, nor the principal objective, of the joint committees. These committees, in the European framework, are not the mirror image of what they are in the national structures. At the Community level there is no coercive power in this matter. The aim of the committees can only be to seek in free discussion the harmonisation of positions within the Common Market, in function both of social progress and balanced economic expansion.

There is no need for any precise limitation of the mandate of the mixed committees, but the social partners must be left with the highest possible freedom of initiative. As it is stated in the preliminary lines of approach to a Community social policy programme, it is a fundamental objective that economic policies should not only be so framed as to take social objectives broadly into consideration, but that the two forms of policy should dovetail into one another as part of the framework for a general coordinated programme at the Community level.

By way of conclusion, it can thus be stated as essential that the two sides of industry should work out, within the Community framework, an instrument of dialogue which does not deal with social questions as a mere by-product of the economic. The subjects to be dealt with will vary as the need arises, and independently of any institutional mandate. There is, however, one reserve. Since the wage level is an integral part of national economic and monetary policy, the dialogue between the partners will relate essentially to the other aspects of working conditions.