

COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

SPEECH BY DR. HILLERY

Vice-President of the Commission

on Social Policy

at the Plenary meeting of the European Parliament

18 February 1975.

Strasbourg

Mr. President,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

As the annual report of the Commission on the Development of the Social Situation in the Community forms part of the General Report on the Activities of the European Communities, it became the rule some years ago for the Commission to give Parliament an account of Community social policy: how it has been carried out during the past year and the prospects for the present year. Although the printed version of the Social Report cannot - for technical reasons - be presented to you at the same time as the General Report, the Commission will endeavour to submit it to your Committee on Social Affairs and Employment for its meeting at the beginning of March.

This morning, President ORTOLI presented to you the overall situation in the Community and stressed the need for greater solidarity and more vigorous Community action. There is no need for me to remind you that 1974 was a difficult year for the Community, particularly in the social field.

The new situation which developed from the energy crisis at the end of 1973 undeniably aggravated circumstances throughout the past year. Up to then a high rate of economic activity allowing rapid social progress had been taken for granted. This pattern was inevitably interrupted by the fall in demand which resulted partly from inflation and partly from governmental measures to fight rising prices and growing balance of payments deficits. The general level of unemployment began to rise faster and faster so that, at the end of 1974, about four million people were out of work, that is to say one out of every 20 wage earners was unemployed.

The other main problems with which all governments were faced were those arising from the accelerating increase of consumer prices, also to some degree imputable to the new energy situation. During 1974 the inflation rate in some member states went up to 20 per cent and higher. The effects of this sharp increase were felt particularly by the most vulnerable sections of the population: the sick, the unemployed, the handicapped and the retired, as well as wage and salary earners with low incomes.

Most countries also had to deal with a growing deficit in their external balance of payments. Some of the actions which are taken by governments to overcome their balance of payments difficulties may have a negative impact in the social field, especially in the field of employment.

The Social Report for 1974 which, as I have indicated, you will receive shortly, will give you further details of the deterioration of the labour market and the impact of price increases.

Taking the employment situation, for instance, it can be seen that unemployment figures began to rise more strongly from mid-year on, but then continued steadily to grow faster, above all in Denmark, Germany and France, and, to a somewhat lesser degree, in the Netherlands, Belgium and Ireland. By the end of 1974, the unemployment rate exceeded 3 per cent of the labour force in all countries except the United Kingdom and Luxembourg, while it was even more than 5 per cent in Denmark, Italy and Ireland.

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Some branches of the economy were particularly affected by the cut-back in demand and the increase in energy prices: this was true not only for the motor vehicle industry which had to take the full effects of the increase in oil prices, but also for most other industries producing durable consumer goods, the demand for which tends generally to slow down in a period of recession. Textile and clothing industries were suffering also from a drop in demand as well as from the fact that the cost of synthetic fibres increased strongly as a consequence of the higher oil prices. Furthermore, construction and building industries were affected not only by higher costs of raw materials but also by some governmental measures to combat excessive demand. Finally, for the first time in years, there was a slowing-down in demand and activity in the service sector.

Where the various groups in the working population were concerned, it appears that the crisis was felt primarily by the unskilled who were particularly concentrated in industries affected by the economic crises. But very soon other categories also were suffering from the more rapid growth of unemployment, above all school-leavers and young workers, older employees and women. By the end of the year, unemployment became more and more widespread amongst migrant workers: many work permits have not been renewed by the employer, and quite a number of migrants were obliged to return to their country of origin. Nevertheless, the Community's regulations on free movement have up to now faced very satisfactorily this most difficult test since their inception.

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Member states have fought rising unemployment not only by means of budgetary and monetary policies but also by social policies. In some countries the reemployment of workers has been helped by the granting of subsidies or by work programmes organized by the public services. Also, to give more protection to workers, the consultation procedures for dealing with individual and mass dismissals have been improved in some countries.

Despite the increasing level of unemployment in general and in some particular industrial branches, there is still a lack of skilled workers in other sectors. Among the various initiatives taken by governments to combat unemployment, therefore, you also find efforts to improve vocational guidance schemes and to intensify the vocational training of young people. Continuation training for adults and re-training, particularly for migrant workers and women, are also important. In this respect, progress can be seen in the arrangements for paid training leave which are being introduced or improved in national legislation and collective agreements.

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The impact of inflationary tendencies dominated wage problems and policies in all the member states during the past year. The main objectives of the demands submitted and the decisions reached on wages and salaries were to safeguard the purchasing power of workers, giving priority to increasing the purchasing power of the least well-off groups.

Altogether, the real growth of wage and salary incomes in 1974 - in spite of the strong price increases - has been high in nearly all countries, and in some of them even higher than it was in 1973. In fact, in most countries there exist systems linking wage levels to price levels or some other economic indicator which help to prevent wage-earners from losing real purchasing power. In one country, initial attempts have been made to implement sliding-scale systems as an aid towards the levelling out of the structure of the wages and salaries by giving additional compensations for price increases to the lowest paid wage earners.

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As already mentioned, inflation tends to undermine the real purchasing power of those groups of the population who are in a disadvantaged economic situation. That is true mainly of the non-active population, whether recipients of social benefits or not. Member countries have undertaken two sorts of measure to give increased protection to people receiving social benefits. The principle of tying social benefits to appropriate economic indicators has been extended and is more or less accepted in most member states, at least where invalidity, old-age and survivors' pensions are concerned. Secondly, in most countries priority has been given to the less favoured categories of the non-active population by introducing guaranteed incomes systems for those whose means of subsistence, for one reason or another, are insufficient and who cannot obtain such means either by work or from personal income or social security benefits. Basic social benefits are also being increased to a much greater degree than other incomes.

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In other social fields, further progress can be noted in 1974. Steps have been taken towards the general introduction of the 40 hours week - which according to the draft recommendation of the Commission should be realized before the end of this year - and it can now be said that this objective has been achieved for the majority of workers in some of the member States. The trend towards an increase in the number of paid holidays and the granting of a fourth week of annual leave (envisaged for the end of 1976 in the draft recommendation I have already mentioned) has also made progress in 1974 in several member states. And finally, various methods of rationalizing working hours by introducing more flexible or individualized working hours, part-time work etc. have found more general application in several Member States during the last year.

Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen, faced with the new situation which arose after the oil crisis, one certainly may ask whether or not a reexamination of the various priority measures of the Social Action Programme as laid down in the Council Resolution of 21 January 1974 is necessary.

I don't think so. Indeed I am convinced the difficulties that have arisen underline the need for strong and vigorous action foreseen in the Social Action Programme. This has been stressed too by the member states. In the Paris Summit communiqué of 10 December 1974 the Heads of Government "re-affirm the importance which they attach to implementation of the measures listed in the Social Action Programme."

In this connection, it is a great pleasure for me to thank Parliament for the excellent cooperation it has given in expressing its opinion on the various proposals of the Commission to implement the first stage of the Action programme. This co-operation was given not only in a very constructive and fruitful manner, but also with the minimum of delay, so that it was possible to implement a first set of actions within the timetable foreseen in the Council Resolution.

From a Community policy point of view I think in fact one can say that 1974 was a very successful year in the social field. Indeed, by the end of the year the Council had agreed on seven of the nine proposals the Commission had submitted to it before 1 April 1974 in accordance with the time-table laid down in the Social Action Programme:-

At the meeting of the Ministers for Social Affairs on 10 June 1974, the Council adopted the first three proposals concerning:

- two decisions and the regulation on action by the European Social Fund (article 4) for migrant workers and for handicapped persons, which has already enabled the Commission to carry out some worthwhile projects for these categories during the 1974 financial year;
- the Resolution establishing the initial Community Action Programme for the vocational rehabilitation of handicapped persons;
- the two decisions on the setting up of an Advisory Committee on Safety and Health for protection at work, and on the extension of the responsibilities of the Mines Safety and Health Committee to all mineral-extraction industries.

At its meeting on 17 December 1974, the Council for Social affairs agreed on a further four proposals:

- The directive on the approximation of the laws of the Member States relating to the application of the principle of equal pay for men and women, which is intended to generalize minimum standards of protection for women in respect of their right to equal pay. It will do this by ensuring that discriminations which still exist in national legislation and collective agreements will be eliminated and that the right to pursue the principle of equal pay cannot be prevented by dismissing women employees. It will also provide that supervision of the application of this right has to be ensured by national legislation.

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- The directive on the approximation of the laws of the member states relating to mass dismissals aims at achieving greater security of workers. It will ensure that collective dismissals cannot be undertaken arbitrarily without prior consultation with workers' representatives and notification to public authorities. At a time when a great number of workers are threatened by dismissals, this important directive will make much more difficult any arbitrary collective dismissals. In the case of unavoidable dismissals, it will alleviate the consequences of the mass dismissals for the workers concerned.

- The regulation establishing a European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training in West-Berlin, the main tasks of which will be to help the Commission to attain the principal objectives of a common vocational training policy and, in particular, the approximation of training standards in the member countries.

- The regulation on the creation of a European Foundation for the Improvement of working and living conditions will be a useful and necessary instrument for more intensive study and more precise analysis and scientific research on all factors affecting the living and working environment.

The two remaining proposals of the Commission, even if not yet adopted, are already being examined by the competent Committees of the Council. They should certainly be adopted by the Council at one of the next meetings of the Ministers for Social Affairs in the course of this year. These two proposals concern:

- A directive on approximation of the legislation of the member states on the retention of the rights and advantages of employees in the case of mergers, take-overs and amalgamations. This draft directive, if adopted, will have important consequences on labour legislation in some member states. A very intensive consultation with all sides concerned is necessary before the Council takes its final decision.
- The previously mentioned recommendation regarding the application of the principle of the 40 hours week and four weeks annual paid holidays, on which you have already given your opinion.

So much for the social development in the Member States in 1974 and the realization of the first stage of the Action Programme. In the present situation nobody can make exact forecasts on the economic development for the months ahead. Even if it may be expected that - in contrast to the forecasts for the United States - the countries of the Community will still have a real increase in growth of their national product in 1975, and that there may be a somewhat accelerated increase in economic activity during the second half of 1975, the severe problems in the fields of employment and prices will not disappear.

The restructuring of the whole economy which has become inevitable because of the new situation regarding the costs of raw materials, requires priority measures in the employment sector. Thus the main emphasis which the Commission has laid on employment policy in the Social Action Programme has to be strengthened. It is for this reason that the Commission has already drafted proposals, and is now working to elaborate them.

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On 18 December 1974 the Commission adopted the Action Programme in favour of migrant workers and their families, which deals with all the crucial problems connected with migration, education and vocational training, the living and working conditions of the migrants and their families, coming from either member states or third countries. This programme aims at achieving the progressive elimination of all existing discriminations against migrants - including those coming from outside the Community - in working and living conditions. One of the proposals made in this programme answers a demand formulated by Parliament some time ago: the right to participate in local elections. Our proposal is that this should be introduced by 1980 at latest, in accordance with conditions still to be defined.

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I'm convinced that this programme will be of great interest to many of you and I'm looking forward to the discussion we will have in the near future when you will be giving your opinion on it. In the course of 1975 and the next few years, quite a number of new proposals for special actions in the various fields concerning migrant workers and their families (free movement, education and vocational training, social security, social services, housing etc.) will follow in order to implement the objectives of the general programme.

Still within the framework of this first objective of the Social Action Programme "attaining full and better employment", the Commission will propose soon the establishment of appropriate consultations between member states on their employment policies and also the promotion of better cooperation of the national employment services. Given the present employment situation, the Commission has already taken initial action by forming an ad hoc group of Directors-General for Employment of the Member States and has discussed with the group the most urgent problems in this field.

1975 is International Women's Year. Among the 130 million women living in the nine member countries, 35 million are working outside the home. Many of these women - in some countries two out of three - are married and consequently have family responsibilities: that is to say they have two jobs to do.

There are several reasons why the majority of women at work are doing jobs requiring little skill or bearing less responsibility and are therefore less well paid than most men: insufficient vocational guidance and training, discrimination against women in respect of access to certain jobs, fewer promotion opportunities, traditional prejudice as regards working women etc. The Commission has presented to the Council a communication on measures to achieve equality between men and women at work and a draft directive aimed at eliminating any existing discrimination of women in national legislation on access to employment and vocational training, promotion and working conditions.

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This communication, which is part of the Commission's contribution to International Women's Year, is a comprehensive examination of the whole range of areas where action is needed in order to improve the status of the many millions of women at work. In the first place it proposes that all jobs must be equally available to men and women, even those jobs, which up to now have been regarded as "suitable" exclusively for men. Not only the employment aspect (vocational guidance and training, equal working conditions, including equal chances for promotion) is taken into account. We have also noted the need for more help for the families of the working women who have family responsibilities: day nurseries, social services for elderly relatives and other forms of assistance.

With regard to the second objective of the Social Action Programme "Improvement of living and working conditions," the Commission is preparing at present - in accordance with the priorities laid down in the Council Resolution - a number of proposals which I would like to mention quite briefly:-

- A system of appropriate consultation between the Member States on their social protection policies by creating a group of national experts which has to assist the Commission in developing a common long-term perspective and a coherent framework for the diverse Community measures to be prepared in the field of social protection.

- An initial programme on health and safety at work which will form the basic framework for the preparation of specific activities to be carried out in stages. All these proposals will be drafted in close collaboration with the Joint Committees and the new Advisory Committee on Safety and Health.

- By mid-January 1975 the Commission had already transmitted to the Council a programme of pilot schemes and studies to combat poverty in the Community, the purpose of which is to develop clearer perceptions as to the causes of poverty and to encourage the Member States themselves to develop new techniques to overcome severe deprivation where it exists.

- On the basis of the conclusions reached at the conference of experts on "Work organization, technological development and motivation of the individual" organized in Brussels from 5 to 7 November last year, a memorandum on "humanization of work" will be drafted and submitted to the Council during 1975. It will try to indicate the steps that could be taken in order to offer workers greater job satisfaction and increased involvement in decision-making.

The new emphasis laid by the Heads of Government on social policy at the last Summit meeting in Paris, will encourage the Commission to elaborate during this year the majority of the actions proposed in the Social Action Programme and still outstanding, with the aim of implementing the complete programme before the end of 1976. The most important of the remaining actions cover such topics as the extension of social protection; "dynamization of social benefits"; employment problems of special groups of workers, especially young school leavers and elderly persons; the social integration of the handicapped; the questions of distribution of incomes and wealth - both of which are greatly affected by the present strong increase in prices; public health; housing; and implementing proposals from the general programmes dealing with migrant workers, women at work, and health and safety at work.

The gradual realization of the Social Action Programme, as it began in the past year, and as it will continue this year, opens the road to the attainment of a comprehensive social policy at Community level and to greater Community solidarity amongst the member states. But this does not constitute the only basis for activities at Community level to achieve the three main social objectives laid down in the Final Communiqué of the first Paris summit conference.

Two other initiatives taken by the Council of Ministers and the Commission may indicate this:

On 16 December 1974, the Council organized a Tripartite Conference on European Social Policy held in Brussels. It was attended by the Ministers of Labour and Social Affairs of the member states and representatives of the Commission and of workers' and employers' organizations. A group of Members of this Parliament attended as observers. This conference provided a new impetus towards the realization of the third objective of the Social Action Programme, namely the increased involvement of management and labour in the economic and social decisions of the Community and that of workers in the operation of firms.

Two of the main conclusions of this conference were:

- to reactivate the Standing Committee on Employment which had not been convened for two years. Yesterday this Committee met to discuss some of the proposals the Commission has prepared in the field of employment (migrants programme, anti-crisis decision, etc.);

- to organize joint sectoral meetings of workers' and employers' representatives in order to combine their efforts in respect of employment and other problems in the various industrial branches. The Commission intends to submit in the near future a communication to the Council concerning the convocation of such joint committees in those sectors which are mainly affected by the present economic crisis.

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A second initiative is being taken by the Commission. Given the serious employment problems in certain regions and industries, as well as those for special categories of workers, the Commission is at present examining how the resources available to the European Social Fund, especially in Article 4, could be brought into action for those industries and for those groups of workers where the employment situation has been particularly influenced by, the present economic situation - the anti-crisis decision I have already mentioned.

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Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen, I would like to end this introduction by underlining the dynamic role the Community social policy has to play. Social problems are not static, they evolve as a result of the ever-changing desires and demands of the individuals and of society as a whole. Our policy therefore must always be flexible enough to take account of whatever new situations and trends may arise. That is why the Commission has already begun to consider how Community social policy should develop after 1976, when the Social Action Programme will have been implemented. We shall submit the result of these considerations to you in good time so that Parliament may make its vital contribution to the profound and detailed discussions we must have on the future European social policy.

TALSMANDENS GRUPPE
SPRECHERGRUPPE
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**PRESSE-MEDELSE
MITTEILUNG AN DIE PRESSE
PRESS-RELEASE**

**INFORMATION A LA PRESSE
INFORMAZIONE ALLA STAMPA
MEDEDELING AAN DE PERS**

Strasbourg,

Brussels, 18 February 1975

SUMMARY OF THE SPEECH BY VICE-PRESIDENT HILLERY
INTRODUCING THE 1974 SOCIAL REPORT AT THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT,
STRASBOURG, 18 FEBRUARY 1975

The year 1974 was a difficult year for the Community, particularly in the social field. The new situation which developed from the energy crisis at the end of 1973 undeniably aggravated circumstances through the past year. Up to then a high rate of economic activity allowing rapid social progress had been taken for granted. This pattern was inevitably interrupted by the fall in demand which resulted partly from inflation and partly from governmental measures to fight rising prices and growing balance-of-payments deficits. The general level of unemployment began to rise faster and faster so that, at the end of 1974, about four million people were out of work, that is to say one out of every 20 wage earners was unemployed.

The other main problems with which all governments were faced were those arising from the accelerating increase of consumer prices, also to some degree imputable to the new energy situation. During 1974, the inflation rate in some Member States went up to 20 per cent and higher. The effects of this sharp increase were felt particularly by the most vulnerable sectors of the population, the sick, the unemployed, the handicapped and the retired, as well as wage and salary earners with low incomes.

Most countries also had to deal with a growing deficit in their external balance of payments. Some of the actions which are taken by governments to overcome their balance-of-payments difficulties may have a negative impact in the social field, especially in the field of employment. The Social Report for 1974 gives further details of the deterioration of the labour market and the impact of price increases.

Taking the employment situation, for instance, it can be seen that unemployment figures began to rise more strongly from mid-year on, but then continued steadily to grow faster, above all in Denmark, Germany and France and, to a somewhat lesser degree, in the Netherlands, Belgium and Ireland. By the end of 1974, the unemployment rate exceeded 3 per cent of the labour force in all countries except the United Kingdom and Luxembourg, while it was even more than 5 per cent in Denmark, Italy and Ireland.

Sectors most affected

Some branches of the economy were particularly affected by the cut-back in demand and the increase in energy prices: this was true not only for the motor vehicle industry which had to take the full effects of the increase in oil prices, but also for most other industries producing durable consumer goods, the demand for which tends generally to slacken in a period of recession. Textile and clothing industries were suffering also from a drop in demand as well as from the fact that the cost of synthetic fibres increased strongly as a consequence of the higher oil prices. Furthermore, construction and building industries were affected

not only by higher costs of raw materials but also by some governmental measures to combat excessive demand. Finally, for the first time in years, there was a slowing down in demand and activity in the service sector.

Where the various groups in the working population were concerned, it appears that the crisis was felt primarily by the unskilled who were concentrated in industries affected by the economic crises. But very soon other categories also were suffering from the more rapid growth of unemployment, above all school-leavers and young workers, older employees and women. By the end of the year, unemployment became more and more widespread amongst migrant workers: many work permits have not been renewed by the employers, and quite a number of migrants were obliged to return to their country of origin. Nevertheless, the Community's regulations on free movement have up to now faced very satisfactorily this most difficult test since their inception.

Member States have fought rising unemployment not only by means of budgetary and monetary policies but also by social policies. In some countries the re-employment of workers has been helped by the granting of subsidies or by work programmes organised by the public services. Also, to give more protection to workers, the consultation procedures for dealing with individual and mass dismissals have been improved in some countries.

Despite the increasing level of unemployment in general and in some particular industrial branches, there is still a lack of skilled workers in other sectors. Among the various initiatives taken by governments to combat unemployment, therefore, you also find efforts to improve vocational guidance schemes and to intensify the vocational training of young people.

Less-favoured groups

Inflation tends to undermine the real purchasing power of those groups of the population who are in a disadvantaged economic situation. This is true mainly of the non-active population, whether recipients of social benefits or not. Member countries have undertaken two sorts of measures to give increased protection to people receiving social benefits. The principle of tying social benefits to appropriate economic indicators has been extended and is more or less accepted in most Member States, at least where invalidity, old-age and survivors' pensions are concerned. Secondly, in most countries priority has been given to the less-favoured categories of the non-active population by introducing guaranteed incomes systems for those whose means of subsistence, for one reason or another, are insufficient and who cannot obtain such means either by work or from personal income or social security benefits. Basic social benefits are also being increased to a much greater degree than other incomes.

Social Action Programme

Faced with the new situation which arose after the oil crisis, one certainly may ask whether or not a re-examination of the various priority measures of the Social Action Programme as laid down in the Council Resolution of 21 January 1974 is necessary.

I don't think so. Indeed, I am convinced the difficulties that have arisen underline the need for strong and vigorous action foreseen in the Social Action Programme. This has been stressed too by the Member States in the Paris Summit communiqué of 10 December 1974. The Heads of Government "re-affirm the importance which they attach to implementation of the measures listed in the Social Action Programme".

From a Community policy point of view I think in fact one can say that 1974 was a very successful year in the social field. Indeed, by the end of the year the Council had agreed on seven of the nine proposals the Commission had submitted to it before 1 April 1974 in accordance with the timetable laid down in the Social Action Programme; and the remaining two should be adopted during 1975.

These are a directive on approximation of the legislation of the Member States on the retention of the rights and advantages of employees in the case of mergers, takeovers and amalgamations and the recommendation regarding the application of the principle of the 40 hour week and four weeks annual paid holidays.

In the present situation nobody can make exact forecasts on the economic development for the months ahead. Even if it may be expected that - in contrast to the forecasts for the United States - the countries of the Community will still have a real increase in growth of their national product in 1975, and that there may be a somewhat accelerated increase in economic activity during the second half of 1975, the severe problems in the fields of employment and prices will not disappear. The restructuring of the whole economy which has become inevitable because of the new situation regarding the costs of raw materials require priority measures in the employment sector. Thus the main emphasis which the Commission has laid on employment policy in the Social Action Programme has to be strengthened.

On 18 December 1974 the Commission adopted the Action Programme in favour of migrant workers and their families, which deals with all the crucial problems connected with migration, education and vocational training, the living and working conditions of the migrants and their families, coming from either Member States or third countries. This programme aims at achieving the progressive elimination of all existing discrimination against migrants - including those coming from outside the Community - in working and living conditions.

The Commission has also presented to the Council a communication on measures to achieve equality between men and women at work and a draft directive aimed at eliminating any existing discrimination of women in national legislation on access to employment and vocational training, promotion and working conditions.

This communication, which is part of the Commission's contribution to International Women's Year, is a comprehensive examination of the whole range of areas where action is needed in order to improve the status of the many millions of women at work.

With regard to the second objective of the Social Action Programme "Improvement of living and working conditions", the Commission is preparing at present - in accordance with the priorities laid down in the Council Resolution - a number of proposals. These include a system of appropriate consultation between the Member States on their social protection policies, and an initial programme on health and safety at work.

In mid-January 1975 the Commission transmitted to the Council a programme of pilot schemes and studies to combat poverty in the Community. A memorandum on "humanisation of work" will be drafted and submitted to the Council during 1975. It will try to indicate the steps that could be taken in order to offer workers greater job satisfaction and increased involvement in decision-making.

I would like to end this introduction by underlining the dynamic role the Community social policy has to play. Social problems are not static, they evolve as a result of the ever-changing desires and demands of the individuals and of society as a whole. Our policy therefore must always be flexible enough to take account of whatever new situations and trends may arise.

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**INFORMATION A LA PRESSE
INFORMAZIONE ALLA STAMPA
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Bruxelles, le 18 février 1975

EXTRAITS DU DISCOURS PRONONCE PAR M. HILLERY, VICE-PRESIDENT DE LA COMMISSION,
SUR LA POLITIQUE SOCIALE A LA SESSION PLENIERE DU PARLEMENT EUROPEEN,
A STRASBOURG, LE 18 FEVRIER 1975

1974 a été une année difficile pour la Communauté, en particulier dans le domaine social. Les bouleversements provoqués par la crise de l'énergie à la fin de 1973 ont indéniablement entraîné une détérioration de la situation durant toute l'année écoulée. Jusque là on avait considéré comme allant de soi un niveau d'activité économique élevé permettant de rapides progrès dans le domaine social. Ce tableau idyllique a été inéluctablement assombri par la réduction de la demande résultant d'une part de l'inflation et d'autre part des mesures prises par les gouvernements pour lutter contre la hausse des prix et redresser les déséquilibres croissants des balances des paiements. Le taux général du chômage a commencé à s'accroître à un rythme de plus en plus rapide de sorte qu'à la fin de 1974 on comptait près de 4 millions de personnes sans emploi, ce qui signifie qu'un salarié sur vingt était en chômage.

Les autres grands problèmes auxquels tous les gouvernements ont été confrontés sont la conséquence de l'augmentation de plus en plus rapide des prix à la consommation, imputables également en partie au coût de l'énergie. Pendant l'année 1974, le taux d'inflation a atteint et même dépassé 20% dans certains Etats membres. Les effets de cette hausse brutale ont été particulièrement ressentis par les catégories sociales les plus vulnérables: les malades, les chômeurs, les handicapés et les retraités, ainsi que les salariés à faibles revenus.

La plupart des pays ont eu également à faire face au déficit croissant de leur balance des paiements. Certaines mesures prises par les gouvernements pour surmonter les difficultés de balance des paiements peuvent avoir des effets négatifs dans le domaine social, en particulier celui de l'emploi. Vous trouverez dans l'exposé social pour 1974, que vous recevrez prochainement, .. comme je vous l'ai indiqué, des renseignements détaillés sur la détérioration du marché de l'emploi et les conséquences des hausses de prix.

En ce qui concerne la situation de l'emploi par exemple, on constate que si les taux de chômage ont commencé à s'accroître plus fortement à partir du milieu de l'année, cette tendance s'est accélérée depuis lors, surtout au Danemark, en Allemagne et en France, et, dans une moindre mesure, aux Pays-Bas, en Belgique et en Irlande. A la fin de 1974, le taux de chômage dépassait 3 % dans tous les pays, sauf au Royaume-Uni et au Luxembourg, il atteignait même plus de 5 % au Danemark, en Italie et en Irlande.

Secteurs les plus touchés

Certaines branches d'activités économiques ont été particulièrement affectées par la réduction de la demande et la hausse des prix de l'énergie : c'est le cas non seulement de l'industrie automobile qui a subi de plein fouet les effets de la hausse du prix du pétrole, mais aussi de la plupart des autres industries productrices de biens de consommation durables, dont la demande tend généralement à fléchir en période de récession. Les industries textiles et de l'habillement ont elles aussi souffert d'un fléchissement de la demande ainsi que de la forte augmentation des coûts des fibres synthétiques résultant de la hausse des prix du pétrole. D'autre part, les industries du bâtiment ont été affectées non seulement par la hausse des coûts des matières premières mais aussi par les mesures gouvernementales visant à freiner une demande excessive. Enfin, on a assisté pour la première fois depuis plusieurs années, à un ralentissement de la demande et de l'activité dans le secteur des services.

Si les diverses catégories socio-professionnelles ont été affectées c'est la main-d'oeuvre non qualifiée concentrée en particulier dans les industries en déclin qui a ressenti le plus durement les effets de la crise. Mais, très rapidement, d'autres catégories ont été touchées par l'augmentation plus rapide du chômage, et surtout les jeunes quittant l'école, les jeunes travailleurs, les travailleurs âgés et les femmes. Vers la fin de l'année, les travailleurs migrants ont été de plus en plus affectés par le chômage : de nombreux permis de travail n'ont pas été renouvelés par les employeurs et un grand nombre de migrants ont dû retourner dans leur pays d'origine. Néanmoins, les règlements communautaires concernant la libre circulation ont donné jusqu'à présent des résultats très satisfaisants devant l'épreuve la plus difficile à laquelle ils aient été soumis depuis leur entrée en vigueur.

Les Etats membres ont lutté contre l'augmentation du chômage non seulement au moyen des politiques budgétaire et monétaire mais aussi par des mesures de politique sociale. Dans certains pays, le réemploi de travailleurs a été favorisé par l'octroi de subventions et la mise en oeuvre de programmes de travaux par les pouvoirs publics. En outre, les procédures de consultation en cas de licenciements individuels et collectifs ont été améliorées dans certains pays afin d'assurer une meilleure protection des travailleurs.

Malgré l'augmentation du chômage en général et dans certaines branches de l'industrie en particulier, il subsiste une pénurie de main d'oeuvre qualifiée dans d'autres secteurs. C'est pourquoi on trouve également, parmi les diverses mesures adoptées par les gouvernements pour combattre le chômage, des actions visant à améliorer les programmes d'orientation professionnelle et à intensifier la formation professionnelle des jeunes.

Les catégories les moins favorisées

L'inflation tend à rogner le pouvoir d'achat réel des catégories économiquement défavorisées. Cela est vrai surtout de la population non active, qu'elle bénéficie ou non des prestations sociales. Les Etats membres ont mis en oeuvre deux types de mesures pour assurer une meilleure protection des bénéficiaires de prestations sociales. Le principe consistant à lier les prestations sociales à la situation économique a été étendu dans son application et est plus ou moins admis dans la plupart des Etats membres, du moins en ce qui concerne les pensions d'invalidité, de vieillesse et de survie. D'autre part, la plupart des pays ont donné la priorité aux catégories de la population non active les plus défavorisées en prévoyant des garanties de revenus en faveur de ceux dont les moyens de subsistance sont insuffisants pour une raison ou une autre et qui ne peuvent se les procurer par le travail,

grâce à un revenu personnel ou aux prestations de la sécurité sociale. Les prestations sociales de base font également l'objet d'augmentations beaucoup plus importantes que les autres revenus.

Programme d'action sociale

Face à la nouvelle situation créée par la crise du pétrole, on peut se demander s'il n'est pas nécessaire de procéder à un réexamen des diverses mesures prioritaires prévues dans le programme d'action sociale tel qu'il a été défini dans la résolution du Conseil du 21 janvier 1974.

Je ne suis pas de cet avis car les difficultés actuelles rendent à mon sens encore plus nécessaire l'action énergique et vigoureuse prévue dans le programme d'action sociale. Cette nécessité a d'ailleurs été soulignée dans le communiqué publié à l'issue du Sommet de Paris du 10 décembre 1974, où les chefs de gouvernement "confirment l'importance qu'ils accordent à la réalisation des mesures inscrites dans le programme d'action sociale".

On peut affirmer que pour ce qui est de la politique communautaire, l'année 1974 s'est soldée par des résultats très positifs dans le domaine social. En effet, le Conseil avait approuvé à la fin de l'année sept des neuf propositions que la Commission lui avait soumises avant le 1er avril 1974 conformément au calendrier arrêté dans le programme d'action sociale; les deux autres devraient être adoptés en 1975.

Il s'agit d'une directive relative au rapprochement des législations des Etats membres sur le maintien des droits et avantages des travailleurs en cas de fusions de sociétés, de transferts d'établissements, ainsi que de concentrations d'entreprises et de la recommandation concernant l'application du principe de la semaine de 40 heures et des quatre semaines de congés payés annuels.

Dans la situation actuelle, personne ne peut se hasarder à faire des prévisions sur l'évolution économique au cours des prochains mois. Même si l'on peut espérer que - contrairement aux précisions concernant les Etats-Unis - les pays de la Communauté enregistreront encore une augmentation réelle de la croissance de leur produit national en 1975 et qu'il y aura une certaine accélération de l'activité économique au cours du deuxième semestre de 1975, les problèmes graves qui se posent dans les domaines de l'emploi et des prix ne disparaîtront pas. La restructuration de toute l'économie, rendue inévitable par la nouvelle situation concernant les coûts des matières premières, nécessite des mesures prioritaires dans le secteur de l'emploi. Ainsi, l'accent mis par la Commission sur la politique de l'emploi dans le programme d'action sociale doit être renforcé.

La Commission a adopté le 18 décembre 1974 le programme d'action en faveur des travailleurs migrants et de leurs familles, qui traite tous les problèmes cruciaux liés à la migration, à l'éducation et à la formation professionnelle, aux conditions de vie et de travail des migrants et de leurs familles originaires des Etats membres ou des pays tiers. Ce programme a pour but d'éliminer progressivement toutes les discriminations actuelles à l'égard des travailleurs migrants - y compris ceux venus des pays tiers - dans les conditions de vie et de travail.

La Commission a aussi présenté au Conseil une communication sur des mesures visant à assurer l'égalité de traitement des hommes et des femmes au travail ainsi qu'un projet de directive visant à supprimer toutes les discriminations à l'encontre des femmes dans les législations nationales en ce qui concerne l'accès à l'emploi, à la formation et à la promotion professionnelle, et les conditions de travail.

Cette communication, qui fait partie de la contribution de la Commission à l'année internationale de la femme, examine en détail tous les domaines où une action doit être menée pour améliorer le statut des millions de femmes au travail.

En ce qui concerne le deuxième objectif du programme d'action sociale, "l'amélioration des conditions de vie et de travail", la Commission prépare actuellement, conformément aux priorités définies dans la résolution du Conseil, un certain nombre de propositions et notamment un système de consultations appropriées entre les Etats membres sur leurs politiques de protection sociale ainsi qu'un premier programme sur la sécurité, l'hygiène et la protection de la santé sur les lieux de travail.

A la mi-janvier 1975, la Commission avait déjà transmis au Conseil un programme de projets et d'études pilotes visant à lutter contre la pauvreté dans la Communauté. Un mémorandum sur "l'humanisation du travail" sera élaboré et présenté au Conseil en 1975; il essayera d'indiquer les mesures qui pourraient être prises pour donner aux travailleurs une plus grande satisfaction professionnelle et pour les faire participer davantage aux prises de décisions.

Je voudrais terminer cette introduction en soulignant le rôle dynamique que la politique sociale communautaire doit jouer. Les problèmes sociaux ne sont pas statiques, ils évoluent avec les demandes et les désirs sans cesse changeants des individus et de l'ensemble de la société. Aussi notre politique doit-elle être toujours suffisamment souple pour tenir compte des situations et des tendances nouvelles pouvant apparaître.