



HEADLINES

EU / SOCIAL

Brussels 16/01/2002: Social partners involved in managing change

The European Commission has launched a formal consultation with social partners at EU level (UNICE, UEAPME, CEEP, ETUC) on how businesses and workers can anticipate and manage the social effects of corporate restructuring. They are expected to give their views on the need for new EU-level principles to govern socially "intelligent" restructuring (while acknowledging that a substantial legal framework, collective agreements and specific traditions at national, sectoral and company level already exist), leading to good practices or codes of conduct between social partners. They now will have six weeks to make their initial response to the EC, after which the EC will clarify its ideas and direction it possibly would like to take.

In its paper, the EC has set out four categories of questions for debate:

- employability and adaptability of workers (complementing a "pillar" of the European employment strategy already in place);
- effectiveness and simplification of law and procedures;
- external responsibilities of business (comparable to the external related aspects of a company within the Green Paper on Corporate Social Responsibility); and
- implementation of socially-responsible restructuring.

UNICE has indicated that they share most of the Commission's analysis, especially the argument that change is a necessity. They also stressed that lots of efforts are already undertaken and that redundancies are always a last resort in any case, but that they are willing to consider what added value can be brought to existing arrangements, whether at local, national or European level.

EU / TRANSPORT

Strasbourg 17/01/2002: EU agrees on attestation for non-EU lorry drivers

An agreement was reached after the European Parliament approved in its second reading the common Council position on the regulation for a uniform attestation for lorry drivers. The regulation will apply, one year after it enters into force (following publication in the Official Journal in a few weeks), to all drivers from third countries who are engaged in international transport within the EU in the service of an EU company. However, after a Commission assessment of the scheme (the latest after four year), there could be a decision to extend it to EU drivers also, increasing the administrative burden on employers.

An attestation will be the proof that the driver of a heavy goods vehicle is lawfully entitled to drive the vehicle under the rules and regulations of an EU Member State. The aim is mainly to counteract distortions of competition as some EU companies are still engaging non-EU drivers (cheap labour) in

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an illegal manner. Currently for Member States it is very difficult to check a driver to ascertain the legal propriety of an employment relationship.

EU / ENVIRONMENT

Strasbourg 17/01/2002: EP demands a more concrete action programme

The European Parliament would like to see that the EU's 6th Environment Action Programme (see also ESBA Weekly - Vol 3 - N 8), which is intended as a route map for the EU's environment policy over the next ten years, includes more explicit targets and stricter timetables in the field of pesticides, dangerous chemicals, greenhouse gases and noise pollution. In its second reading, the Parliament also demanded that the four thematic strategies will be in place three years after the programme itself is adopted, rather than the Council's preferred deadline of five years.

Parliament and Council will now have to reach an agreement via conciliation before the programme can be adopted.

EU / INTERNAL MARKET

Strasbourg 17/01/2002: EP discusses public procurement directive

The European Parliament has finally dealt for the first time in plenary with the Commission's proposals (issued in 2000) for a new public procurement directive intended to simplify and update existing EU legislation on public procurement. The proposal seeks to improve and update the procedures for awarding public supply, public service and public works contracts by clarifying, simplifying and merging the three existing directives into a single text, introducing electronic purchasing mechanisms, and taking better into account social and environmental criteria in the awarding procedures.

The most controversial EP amendments were related to so-called thresholds (i.e. the amount above which a public contract is subject to Community rules (transparency, EU-wide competition,...)). Here, the EP requested between a 32% and 53% rise of the thresholds compared to the amounts in the Commission proposal. Most European Parliament Members namely argued that the existing lower thresholds have not lead to any growth in cross-border trade in public procurement contracts, while the administrative costs incurred by local authorities putting work out to tender, are disproportionately high.

Some others, however, indicated that the current EU-wide public procurement opportunities in place are simply not enough known yet to most enterprises and that more is to be expected from EU-wide competition and transparency. An increase of the thresholds would reduce the scope of the directive and therefore limit the possibilities of companies to operate cross-border.

The EC already indicated that the thresholds amendments of the European Parliament are not likely to be accepted by the Council and the EC as they would have a negative effect on the opening up of the market in public contracts. However, the EC indicated that it is willing to take on board amendments on subcontracting, centralisation, electronic systems and confidentiality.

SMEs most of all need transparency and flexibility, not disproportionate restrictions. Too many SMEs find it still too difficult to tap into this lucrative market. A swift adoption of the proposed legislation is therefore needed. It is questionable whether the more than 250 amendments tabled by the European Parliament in its first reading serve that purpose.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

Brussels (B) 21-22/01/2002: Benchmarking local and regional strategies for assisting SMEs to GoDigital; Theme: SMEs, E-commerce, benchmarking.

More info: <http://195.200.108.36/corz203.htm>

Brussels (B) 30/01/2002: From Lisbon to Barcelona: towards a more competitive Europe; Theme: Lisbon, competitiveness, SMEs. More info:

http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/enterprise/events/competitiveness_2002/index.htm

Brussels (B) 31/01/2002: Regulatory Impact Analysis - Better regulation in the EU; Theme: Regulation.
More info: Lisbon, SMEs. More info: info@theepc.be

Brussels (B) 08/02/2002: PECAs and Opportunities in Industry; Theme: Internal Market, CEECs, Conformity. More info: <http://www.eotc.be/Events>

Brussels (B) 20/02/2002: A showcase of British enterprise; Theme: Lisbon, SMEs. More info: info@smallbusinesseurope.org