



HEADLINES

Employment: EP: Parliament Pushes Huge Expansion of Maternity Leave

On 23 February, the parliament committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality voted in favour of a proposal to change the pregnant workers directive. As a result of the proposed changes, Member States would be obliged to offer 20 weeks of fully paid maternity leave and a fortnight of remunerated leave for fathers. This differs from the existing Commission proposal which would require a minimum of 18 weeks of paid maternity leave. The committee's proposal faces a first reading before the full European Parliament in March 2010, but it will take over a year before it can voted into law.

ESBA OPINION

Although ESBA fully appreciates the necessity to safeguard the health and safety of pregnant women and those who have recently given birth across the EU, the recent decision by the parliament Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality should be treated with caution. The proposal's potential positive impact on the work-life balance of European citizens has severe ramifications for the daily business operations of small and micro businesses in the EU. Small businesses in most Member States have to bear a double cost burden by having to finance the parental leave as well as investing in replacement for the absent worker. This is already a heavy burden on any small company. Extending this paid leave will increase the burden on small businesses which could ultimately lead to unemployment.

In the UK alone, estimates suggest that increasing the time of paid maternity leave could cost over 2 billion pounds a year. Given the current economic climate, such additional costs would impose untenable burdens on businesses and governments. ESBA urges MEPs to apply the "Think Small First" principle when developing worker's rights and to flesh out a policy, which is beneficial for pregnant workers and small businesses alike.

To read more about changes to the pregnant workers directive, please click [here](#).

IN BRIEF

EU Digital Economy: Promoting ICT Intelligence through E-Skills

From 1st to 5th March, the Commission is organizing an *e-skills week*, which marks the culmination of its campaign to encourage Internet and computer literacy among young entrepreneurs, small firms and students. While ICT seems to have become an unavoidable part of European life, a 2005 Commission survey found that one third of EU citizens were not computer literate, which includes 10% of all 16-24 year olds. According to the Commission, this gap must be narrowed, since e-skills are crucial for fostering entrepreneurship and economic growth in the modern world. In addition to showcasing the results of Commission initiatives in the field of ICT, the *e-skills week* will feature a variety of events around Europe.

To read more about e-skills week, please click [here](#).

EP: Parliament's Ambitious Resolution on Male-Female Equality

On 10 February, the European Parliament adopted its annual resolution on equality between women and men in the EU. The resolution calls for more action to prevent violence against women and ensure the full recognition of sexual and reproductive rights. It also argues that issues such as paternity leave, equal pay, and proportional representation of genders should be dealt with at the EU level. The Parliament used the resolution to criticize the Commission's lack of action regarding revisions of the existing law on application of the principle of equal pay and the lack of EU legislation on paternity leave. It also encouraged Member States to implement a better gender balance in high-level corporate, administrative and political positions.

To read more about the resolution on equality between women and men, please click [here](#).

EP: Micro-finance facility approved in first reading

On 11 February, the European Parliament approved a package of EU funding measures to help the unemployed start up small businesses. The "European Progress Microfinance Facility," provides EUR 100 million over 4 years for people who have either lost their jobs or are at risk of losing their employment. The funds can be used to obtain credits to open small businesses and thus, they will help to simultaneously reduce unemployment and promote entrepreneurship. Under a compromise arrangement, 60% of the funding will come from DG Employment's Progress programme, while 40% will be provided from unallocated margins in the EU budget.

To read more about the micro-finance facility, please click [here](#).

EU Innovation Policy: The Commission presents a new vision

In September 2009, the European Commission announced its plan to publish a European Innovation Act before the spring of 2010. As a contribution to the process of developing a more coherent EU strategy in this field, the Commissioners for innovation and industry, Maire Geoghegan-Quinn and Antonio Tajani, are developing a new policy paper to feed into the high-level debate. The new Commission has highlighted its desire to solve major innovation "bottle-necks," given the importance of research and innovation for recovery from the financial crisis and growth of modern economies.

To read more about the development of the EU's innovation strategy, please click [here](#).

EU: Conclusions from the Competitiveness Council, 1-2 March

The Competitiveness Council is meeting early this week to adopt conclusions on industrial policy, especially as it relates to the use of environmentally friendly cars. It also plans to address progress on the internal market, particularly in the areas of intellectual property rights and information provision. The Spanish Presidency chairs the Council, and the commissioners for industry, the internal market, and research/innovation represent the Commission on it. After the first day of the council, provisional conclusions were reached on establishing principles for a new industrial policy, with a specific focus on sustainable growth and employment. There was also an exchange of views on the future strategy for the creation of growth and jobs, and a resolution on intellectual property rights in the internal market was adopted.

To read the full provisional conclusions of the Competitiveness Council from March 1st, please click [here](#).

To read more about the Competitiveness Council, please click [here](#).

EP: Parliament Takes Firm Action on Late Payments

On 23 February, a draft report on late payments was presented to the Internal Market and Consumer Protection Committee, which will be responsible for the passage of this legislation through parliament. The report aims to update to the existing EU directive on late payments in commercial

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transactions. It proposes that both private firms and public bodies pay equal penalties for late payment, although there is some disagreement among MEPs about whether the penalty should be fixed at 5% of the sum due or whether the penalty rate should progressively increase, according to the amount of time elapsed after the deadline. In any case, the maximum penalty amount is likely to be fixed at EUR 50,000. The draft report does not propose setting a deadline for final payments for private firms, but it does argue that public bodies should have to pay the full amount due by a specific date (for instance, 30 days after the payment was originally due). The vote on this proposal will take place in the Committee on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection in April, while the plenary vote will be in May.

To read more about the report on late payments, please click [here](#).

PUBLICATIONS

DG ECFIN: “Market Integration and Technological Leadership in Europe”

This study was produced for the DG for Economic and Financial Affairs (ECFIN). It traces and analyzes changes in manufacturing firm and industry structure that have been caused by recent major transformations in technology and the process of globalization. The study builds on the results of the “EU Market Share Matrix,” a database, which assesses the performance of leading EU manufacturing firms in terms of product diversification, multinationality, producer concentration, and technological capacity.

To download this publication, please click [here](#).

CONSULTATION

Public consultation on the International Financial Reporting Standard for Small and Medium-sized Entities

Closes on 12 March 2010

The European Commission has launched a public consultation on the International Financial Reporting Standard for SMEs, with the aim of analysing the views of EU Stakeholders. The consultation is part of the review of the 4th and 7th Company Law Directives by the Commission Directorate-General for Internal Market and Services.

To read more about the consultation and to access the questionnaire to be filled in by stakeholders, please click [here](#).

Online consultation on administrative burdens reduction

Ongoing

The European Commission has launched an online consultation on the reduction of administrative burdens. Inspired by examples of Best Practice in Belgium and the Netherlands, the consultation invites entrepreneurs to identify unnecessary red tape in order to help the EU improve the quality of its legislation. The consultation is part of the Action Programme to reduce admin burdens on businesses in the EU by 25% in 2012.

To access the online consultation, please click [here](#).

COMING UP

EU Institutions: Important dates

3 March 2010 – Commission Communication on the Europe 2020 Strategy, Brussels, Belgium

4 March 2010 – EP Employment Committee Meeting

15 March 2010 – EP Environment Committee Meeting

16 March 2010 – EP Internal Market Committee Meeting

16 March 2010 – EP Employment Committee Meeting

17 March 2010 – EP Committee on Energy Meeting

22 March 2010 – EP Committee on Transport Meeting

Other SME related events

11 March 2010 – Euro-Mediterranean Conference on Technical Textiles and Innovation in the Euro-Mediterranean region, Brussels, Belgium

The main objective of the conference is to enhance Euro-Mediterranean cooperation in research and innovation in technical textiles. Success stories and good practices will be shared from enterprises and institutes, centres and organizations that serve the innovation needs of textile and clothing industry firms in the Euro-Mediterranean Region.

http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/newsroom/cf/itemshortdetail.cfm?item_id=4055

11-12 March 2010 – The Redesigning Business Summit: The Big Rethink, London

Sponsored by the Economist, the European Year for Creativity and Innovation (2009) and many other organizations, this conference provides insights from world-class experts on the trends that are likely to reshape the business environment. Attendees will gain considerable insight about how to adapt their businesses to these major transformations in the future. This conference will be held in London.

<http://www.economistconferences.co.uk/redesigningbusiness/partners>

28-29 April 2010 – European Patent Forum, Madrid, Spain

The Conference is titled, “Assessing Europe’s Renewable Energy Innovation Potential,” and it is organized by the European Patent Office (EPO), in cooperation with the Spanish EU Presidency and the Commission. The two-day conference is due to uncover Europe’s renewable energy-technology strengths and weaknesses, find out whether European industry is still in the race to lead the green boom, and discuss whether political spending and policy support are adequate for the crucial environmental and economic tasks at hand.

http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/newsroom/cf/itemshortdetail.cfm?item_id=4030