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Trade union trio presents recommendations for EU Presidency:

The upcoming EU Trio Presidency of Denmark, Poland and Cyprus must move growth and employment to the top of its agenda. This was the unequivocal message to the coming Presidency, as LO-President, Harald Børsting came to Brussels on Tuesday 8 March to meet with the top trade union leaders from the two other trio countries to sign the programme with their recommendations for the Trio governments.



On 8 March, 2011, LO-President Harald Børsting and his colleagues from the Polish and Cypriot trade union confederations presented and signed a joint programme with a set of specific recommendations for the coming EU-Presidency.

The Trio Presidency will begin on 1 July 2011 and is shared by Denmark, Poland and Cyprus. Although the three countries' trade union movements have different viewpoints and face different challenges, they demonstrate – with this joint programme declaration – that they have one major common goal: The struggle to create growth and employment while maintaining solidarity.

– With this joint declaration, we strongly challenge the governments of the next EU-Presidency to give priority to an ambitious and socially responsible economic policy which will create growth and employment in Europe, says LO-President, Harald Børsting.

Mr Børsting underlined that it is more important than ever that the European trade union movements stand together and show that solidarity can be part of a strategy to fight the crisis.

Representatives from the trade union trio have been working on the programme for the Presidency since September 2010 and in order to formally mark its completion and adoption in March 2011, LO's President signed the document together with his trade union colleagues, Jan Guz, President of the OPPZ, Piotr Duda, President of NSZZ Solidarnosc, Bente Sorgenfrey, President of FTF, Dimides Diomidous, General Secretary from DEOK and General Secretary of SEK, Nicos Moyseos, The ceremony also saw the participation of representatives of the ETUC leadership and of the permanent representations.

One of the areas highlighted in the programme deals with youth issues – especially the problem of youth unemployment and the importance of training initiatives. During the ceremony in Brussels, President of the ETUC's Youth Committee, Tomasz Jasinski, gave a short speech on the severity of youth employment today and the challenges facing the EU in this area.

The main themes addressed in the programme thus include:

- The creation of growth and employment
- More and better jobs and decent work
- A just transition to a green economy based on alternative energy
- A social progress protocol linked to mobility and posting of workers
- Training, education and life-long learning
- The Single Market – an open market with a social dimension
- Health and safety at work
- Gender equality

The full programme can be downloaded at www.lo.dk/english

LO-President: Growth and employment must be ETUC top priorities

This year, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) convenes for Congress in Athens, Greece. At the Congress, the European trade union movements, will, among many other things, discuss the priorities for the coming four years.

In this interview, LO-President, Harald Børsting shares his views on the greatest challenges facing the European trade union movement.



What will be the most important challenges for the European trade union movement in the coming years?

It is clear that, over the years, the EU has gained tremendous influence on the lives of European workers. Standing in the shadow of economic crisis, it is more important than ever that the Member States unite and act decisively. The only way out of the crisis is by creating growth and employment, and we can only do so by pulling together and joining forces at the European

level.

The trade union movements in all of the ETUC-member countries are facing major challenges due to declining membership. This forces us to continue to be very competent and professional when it comes to influencing the decision making institutions in the EU. We are also finding ourselves at a time when we, as a European trade union movement, need to pay great attention to how we prioritize our scarce resources and we must ensure close cooperation between the national and European trade union offices in Brussels.

Some of the most important challenges for the ETUC in the next four years are the fight against social dumping and the creation of growth and stability leading to more and new workplaces. In this connection, one of the key questions that can be expected to appear on the ETUC's agenda in the coming years is: How will we be making a living in future?

And what is the answer to that question?

One of the messages is to create new, knowledge-based workplaces and develop new technologies – for instance in the field of environmental technology – while involving the employees in the innovation process.

– The European Commission and the liberal and conservative governments in Europe are currently using the crisis as an excuse for carrying out tight financial control and major public spending cuts. However, the solution is not to deregulate ourselves out of the crisis. Instead, the Member States and the EU should target resources to creating growth and employment – for instance by moving public investments forward in order to boost the economy, says Harald Børsting.

What will LO-Denmark do to exert its influence in this area?

As of 1 July this year, Denmark will be leading the Trio EU Presidency together with Poland and Cyprus. In this connection, we have strongly encouraged the Danish government to give priority to growth, employment and the fight against social dumping. We need an ambitious policy when it comes to growth and employment.

How high on the list of priorities is the fight against social dumping?

The fight against social dumping is a top priority. The ETUC member organisations must join forces against social dumping. LO therefore fully supports the ETUC's proposal to add a social protocol to the Treaty, just as we support the ETUC's proposed amendment to the Directive on the Posting of Workers. In addition to this, it is important to ensure that Member States actually observe the minimum regulation that exists in the form of EU-directives. Among other things, we suggest that the Commission sets up a supervisory authority before which the social partners should have access to bringing complaints.

We need to be tough on social dumping and we face a major challenge in terms of persuading our European colleagues to push social dumping to the top of the agenda. I would like to add that the proposal on social dumping and wage dumping, which has been put forward by our German and French colleagues, is a good initiative that highlights the fight against the unintended effects of free movement that we are currently witnessing in a number of countries.

Employment Ministry web site: “Let your workers sleep in a stable”

“If it rains, just let your workers sleep in the stable”. Until recently, this piece of advice was posted on the web site of The National Labour Market Authority – an authority under the Danish Ministry of Employment.

It sounds like a good piece of advice from the beginning of last century. It's not. The phrase is one of the many pieces of advice which has been posted at seasonal-work.dk for a number of years now. The web site is run by The National Labour Market Authority and the advice is targeted to Danish farmers seeking cheap labour from Eastern Europe for berry-picking.

The exact wording from the article with good advice was: “It is an advantage, if there are stables where the employees can find shelter for the night in case of heavy rain”.

The union that organises berry-pickers, 3F, was outraged by these contents. – This advice is degrading. Stables? It is reprehensible to see this coming from a public authority which is supposed to be neutral, says Morten Fischer Nielsen, Confederal Secretary in 3F.

– This web site has provided advice for farmers for a number of years – and the farmers have followed this advice. It has made our struggle for decent working conditions a lot more difficult, he adds.

“Throw them out if they complain”

It was only in the beginning of February 2011, when The National Labour Market Authority received complaints, that it chose to change the web site. The site also encouraged Danish farmers to throw out their Eastern European workers immediately in case of “dissatisfaction or disagreements.”

– An employer might mistake this piece of advice for a right to just dismiss employees if they complain about something – for instance – about sleeping in a stable! It is downright outrageous, indecent and undignified. Things like this push pay- and working conditions in the wrong direction, says LO Vice-President, Lizette Risgaard.

In The National Labour Market Authority, the Director General, Berith Madsen, has acknowledged that the unfortunate pieces of advice should never have been posted on the Labour Market Authority’s web site in the first place.

– We deeply regret this, she comments, adding that they were happy that the union had brought their attention to the unfortunate advice. – They were absolutely right. Decent working conditions can only be defined by the social partners. We should not meddle in this. We lay down our arms, said the Director General.

This article is an abbreviated and translated version of the original article posted on 7 February 2011 by online news provider www.avisen.dk

Social Dumping Committee calls for EU-level supervisory authority

LO-Denmark’s Committee on Social Dumping, which was set up in 2009, has prepared a 143-page report which was adopted by the General Council in February 2011. Among other things, the report contains a number of recommendations and suggestions for measures that can be applied in order to fight social dumping. One of the conclusions of the report is that the current rules of the labour law directives must be enforced to a much higher extent than they are today. The Committee’s specific recommendations in this area are rendered below.

A supervisory authority

Surveys show that the directives on working time and the posting of workers, among others, are only enforced to a very limited extent. This is not acceptable. A supervisory authority in the EU Commission should therefore be established with a view to monitoring the implementation of the EU’s labour law directives in order to combat social dumping. The social partners should have access to file complaints before such an authority.

Furthermore, the member states must be under the obligation to prepare an annual report for the supervisory authority. The authority should, on its part, annually report on the progress made in terms of fighting social dumping in the EU.

The Committee’s recommendations:

1. The EU’s labour law directives must be observed.

2. The EU Commission must provide the necessary resources and powers to ensure this. The Commission should, therefore, set up of a supervisory authority which is to ensure enforcement of the EU's labour law directives.
3. The social partners should have access to filing complaints before such an authority.
4. The individual EU member states should be under the obligation to report annually to the Commission on their implementation of the directives.
5. The Commission should, on its part, annually report on the progress in terms of fighting social dumping in the EU.

Cross-border cooperation between public authorities

The Directive on the Posting of Workers necessitates cross-border cooperation between national authorities.

Article 4 in the Directive (from 1996) stipulates the requirements for such cooperation.

However, it does not seem to be fully functional yet. Among other things, it is close to impossible to find out whether an undertaking is actually established in the Member State from which it posts workers or whether it regularly pays pension contributions, social contributions, taxes, etc. for its posted workers.

Efficient liaison offices

Clearly, the liaison offices could – if they were in place and functioning – become an important instrument for preventing social dumping. They would make it possible to obtain information on incoming, foreign companies with a view to establishing whether or not their employees are genuinely posted workers or not. Another possible function of the liaison offices which should not be ruled out is that they could assist in providing information in connection with cross-border debt collection in cases of labour law claims.

Efforts must be made to give higher priority to the work of the liaison offices and make them more efficient.

EU Commissioner meets with Danish social partners

On 9 February 2011, LO's President and the Director General of the Confederation of Danish Employers met with the European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, László Andor. This was a very successful meeting during which the Commissioner showed a keen interest in Danish labour market issues and, at this meeting, LO also presented its proposals to ensure enforcement of the EU's labour law directives.

The overriding issue at the meeting was youth employment, and LO's President commented on the Commission's initiative, "youth on the move", and accounted for the Danish situation and youth initiatives. The Danish vocational training schemes and reimbursement schemes for apprentices, in particular, caught the Commissioner's attention.

The latest figures show that youth unemployment in Denmark has risen to 15 per cent among persons aged 15-29. This is twice as many as in 2008. There are currently 7-8,000 young Danes who need a training placement.

At the meeting, LO-President, Harald Børsting, emphasized the need for extra ef-

forts to help young people complete training and gain a solid foothold on the labour market saying,

- We are pleased that the Commission has proposed the introduction of a youth guarantee as part of “Youth on the move”. Meanwhile, we find that the focus is mainly on young people who are pursuing further education at university-level. We believe that the proposals fail to emphasize the importance of vocational education and training.

Mr Børsting went on to describing some of the possibilities that exist in the Danish vocational training system. In Denmark, most vocational training is alternating training based on the participation of the social partners. Most vocational training programmes involve 25-30 per cent theoretical education and the remainder consist of work-based training. The young persons are employed by the company in which they work and receive an apprentice’s salary in accordance with the collective agreement. This close cooperation between the labour market and the vocational schools has been an efficient weapon for fighting youth unemployment.

The Employer’s Reimbursement System (AER) is a system of financial assistance for apprentices, employers and vocational schools in Denmark. It covers a significant share of the expenses incurred by trainees who find work placement outside Denmark or whose employers post their Danish trainees abroad. Currently, approximately 1,000 young Danish citizens are posted as trainees around the world.

Finally, the LO-President informed the Commissioner of LO’s work with social dumping and accounted for the Social Dumping Committee’s recommendations for ensuring enforcement of the EU’s labour law directives, including the need for a supervisory authority, as described in the previous article.

LO campaigns against abolishment of voluntary early retirement

As part of its campaign against the Danish government’s proposal to abolish the voluntary early retirement scheme in January 2011, LO placed ads with banners like the below image of clenched fists in major Danish newspapers and on billboards and busses. Campaign posters placed all over the country were to make the Danes aware of the actual consequences of a removal of the voluntary early retirement scheme – the latest austerity measure in a long line of measures starting in May 2010.



– The government has proposed an unfair intervention in the right to voluntary early retirement which will have drastic consequences for ordinary LO-workers. As a trade union movement, we have an obligation to lead our members’ attention to this development, says LO’s President, Harald Børsting.

– This intervention will punish a broad range of professions very harshly. The future mason’s apprentices, cleaning assistants and carers face the perspective of working until they are 70 or more. This is not fair on hard-working people who have had a long and strenuous working life, says Harald Børsting.

5,000 union representatives: Hands off our right to voluntary early retirement!

A historical union meeting on 2 February 2011 saw the participation of 5,000 union representatives – the support base of the union movement. We can afford it – a dignified exit from the labour market after a long, hard working life – and the right to choose. These were three of the mottos for the big event in support of the voluntary early retirement scheme

The aim was for the union movement to discuss how to address the government's impairment of the voluntary early retirement scheme and to bring the union representatives into play in order to spark debate on the issue.

LO-President, Harald Børsting and the Presidents of the four greatest affiliated unions kicked-off the meeting with a joint speech. - We are gathered here today to send a message to all Danes. We will fight for the right to voluntary early retirement, solidarity and welfare, they joined in saying.

– The massive support for this event shows that the proposal to abolish the voluntary early retirement scheme has provoked and shocked our support base. We will therefore do all we can to make sure that the government's reform eagerness in this area does not go uncontested, says LO-President Harald Børsting.

Danes will have the shortest retirement

If the government abolishes the voluntary early retirement scheme, the Danes will not only have the highest pensionable age in Western Europe, they will also have the fewest years of retirement. – Deeply unfair, say's LO's Vice-President.

If the government abolishes the voluntary early retirement scheme, as it has proposed, the Danes will have the shortest retirement compared to the rest of Western Europe. This appears from a new study prepared by LO.

From average to last place

Today, Denmark has a middle placement in the list of countries and the average number of years their citizens have for retirement. Meanwhile, with the proposed pension reform, we drop to last place. Among our neighbouring countries, the Swedish and Finnish workers can look forward to four more years of retirement compared to the Danes in 2030 while Norwegians have 2.5 years more. – In addition to this, the pension systems in these countries allow citizens to take their public retirement pension even earlier under certain conditions. Southern Europeans also have many more years of retirement to look forward to than the Danes. And France tops the list with a total of 8 years longer retirement compared to Danish workers.

Facts on the Danish voluntary early retirement scheme:

- In January 2011, the Danish government presented its proposal for a pension reform. It includes the abolishment of voluntary early retirement for Danish workers.
- The voluntary early retirement age was introduced in 1979 with a view to bringing down youth unemployment and to make it easier for worn-down senior employees to retire before the pensionable age with dignity. It is one of the building blocks in the Danish pension system.
- Today, workers who have signed on to this scheme and paid in their monthly contributions to it during their working life have the possibility to retire from the labour market from the age of 60.



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A sad record

LO finds that the Danish government's reform proposal is likely to have completely unintended effects that make it much harsher than it needs to be.

– The Danes will not only have the highest pensionable age in Western Europe. They will also be punished by having the fewest years of retirement. This is unfair and unnecessary, concludes LO's Vice-President.

The government's announced pension reform will give Denmark a record-low placement as the country with the worst possible pension system in Europe.