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Interview with John Monks, general secretary of ETUC

Working Time Directive: No progress without a quid pro quo

By Marianne Slegers in Dublin | Tuesday 10 November 2009



John Monks, who has been the chair of the ETUC, the European Trade Union Confederation, since 2003, is of the opinion that the EU should make greater efforts to protect young people from unemployment. He believes in a free market, but thinks that in hard economic times, it is okay to protect jobs. He also thinks that new talks on a review of the Working Time Directive might prove to be very difficult if no quid pro quo is granted.

How would you rate the EU’s response to the crisis?

The EU’s response on the banks was fine. The European Central Bank has also played a good game but the missing element is Europe-wide action on unemployment, which keeps rising. This trend will almost certainly continue throughout next year and probably even beyond. In particular, youth unemployment will be a problem. For now, the countries are dealing with this individually and I think they don’t really want a Europe-wide response. The countries that are quite well run don’t want to pay for the others. Germany, the Netherlands or the Nordic countries are very reluctant to pay for any action in countries with more debt and a less promising economy.

Could you illustrate this with an example?

The Commission has proposed to relax the rules of the European Structural Funds and tried to get away from the idea that a member state has to provide for matching funding to EU money. That has been blocked by the Council of Ministers, with Germany playing a prominent role, but also by some of the other main net contributor states. The EU should in particular undertake some action aimed at young people. We are working on a proposal for ‘youth guarantees’ concerning work and educational training schemes. This project could get some financial

support from EU funds to support countries that probably cannot afford it. I am thinking in particular of the Central and Eastern European countries.

Should jobs be protected in times of crisis?

Let's be clear, jobs are being protected at the moment. The short-term working schemes in Germany, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, Belgium and Austria, they are all about protecting jobs and keeping people in work, who would otherwise become unemployed. Although I am from a fairly free market background - I come from the UK - I think free market principles should never be adhered to religiously. At the same time, I think there are times when certain companies that are essential to a particular community and need help to restructure should not be thrown into bankruptcy if they go wrong. So I am in favour of a pragmatic approach and I think that some support for key companies in difficulty is okay. That is happening with Opel and with the car industry in general. They have received a lot of support, which is a form of protectionism. I would agree with this to a certain extent and for a certain amount of time.

When should the stimulus measures be lifted?

I don't know the answer to that. I think it is going to be a difficult decision to make. I am not surprised that governments and central banks are worried about this and are trying to plan ahead. But they are in great danger of acting too quickly and pulling the stimulus measures back too early. "Not yet" should be the answer to your question. Once unemployment goes down, I might be more interested in that question.

What do you think the review of the Lisbon strategy should entail?

I think the current Lisbon Strategy for Growth and Jobs has the ridiculous aim of making the EU the most competitive and dynamic economy in the world. That was really a PR lead sentence, which was for sure devised by a press officer. The strategy was fine for the first five years, but I would say that it collapsed in the face of the crisis. That was the end of it, now we should start thinking again. The priority now is to overcome the crisis. This will take us five years. And, frankly, I can't look far beyond this crisis and its impact on jobs. I do, however, hope that during the social crisis we could be laying the ground for a 'greener' economy and for a better skilled workforce.

How would you assess the current status of the Working Time Directive?

The directive is stuck, basically, and it is important to recall the reasons behind this. It is stuck because the British government won't give up its opt-out, or even agree to review its opt-out within five years or so. Against such background, the scope for us to negotiate changes to the directive remains very limited. So it is going to be difficult at the social partners' level to come up with something useful. It appears that the Commission is looking to implement a broad review of the whole directive. Well, I still think it is going to be difficult to avoid the central issues, ie the opt-out and the on-call time issue. The reality is that we have got a Court of Justice judgement in our favour and unless we can get some quid pro quo, it is difficult to see how we, or our allies at the European Parliament, could agree to any change.