

## **There's no time left to lose: We need a new EWC Directive**

The 9th International Conference of the Otto Brenner Foundation, in collaboration with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the Hans Böckler Foundation and the European Trade Union Institute, which was held on May 14-16 2008 in Kranjska Gora, Slovenia, addressed the challenges of „Trade Unions at a Turning Point – Company-level and sectoral fields of action“.

In Central and Eastern Europe in particular, there is great need for action in order to strengthen the right to strike, collective bargaining rights, and the establishment of effective structures for information and consultation in the workplace. The basis for cross-border employee interest representation must also be significantly improved. In many areas, trade unions can make important contributions to developing and strengthening these rights. The improvement of the working capacity of European Works Councils (EWCs) requires urgent action. We therefore explicitly welcome that the EU Commission has announced the revision of the EWC Directive by the end of the year.

The adoption of the EWC Directive in 1994 laid an important foundation for a social Europe: at last, national barriers to an effective cross-border representation of the interests of European workforces could be overcome. At last, trade unions and workplace employee representatives had the possibility to keep step with the rapidly progressing economic integration in Europe.

The trade unionists were important motors in implementing the EWC Directive in over 850 companies today. EWCs are not only faced with far-reaching company restructuring, but they also address the day-to-day Europeanisation of company policies regarding issues such as the introduction of new production technologies, personnel policy, training, and health and safety measures.

Roughly 14.000 EWC members experience the economic integration of Europe on a daily basis. Their work gives rise to a „Europeanisation from below“, which promotes the development of European civil society and a social Europe.

Moreover, the contribution of EWCs to the integration of the new EU Member States should not be underestimated: nearly 70% of all EWCs today include establishments in the new EU Member States.

Many EWCs remain well below their potential, however. In numerous cases, their participation rights are dramatically inadequate! They often lack the necessary resources or the ability to call upon the support of their trade unions which they would need in order to be able to fulfil their role as truly cross-border representatives of employee interests. The many legal problems and uncertainties which have cropped up in practice urgently need to be resolved. And finally, many workforces in companies operating across national borders in Europe are denied the participation rights contained in the EWC Directive because of exemption clauses or high thresholds.

The revision of the EWC Directive has been overdue since 1999. The demands of the trade unions for the improvement of the EWC Directive are based on daily practice and have been widely discussed over the years. The recent consultation paper put forward by the EU Commission contains many suggestions for improvement which now need to be secured in the framework of the revision of the EWC Directive.

The ETUC therefore called upon the EU Commission to put forward a proposal for a revised EWC Directive by the beginning of June 2008, so that a revised EWC Directive could be adopted by the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers by the end of the year.

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