

Trade unions need to keep pressing for a more social Semester



On 1 October over 60 trade union representatives from 22 countries took part in a lively conference in Brussels on the European Semester - the European Union's annual process of economic and social policy coordination.

(3 October 2019) Participants acknowledged that there had been some rebalancing of economic and social priorities, particularly with the introduction of the European Pillar of Social Rights as a measure against which to judge the performance of EU Member States. However, there was some concern that this re-balancing had not gone far enough and that social issues were still ultimately subordinate to the fiscal constraints set by the Stability and Growth Pact.

The conference was part of a two-year project funded by the European Commission and run by EPSU with three other partners - the ETUCE trade union federation for education, the University of Nottingham (UoN) and the European Social Observatory

(OSE).

Analysing the Semester

Professor Howard Stevenson (UoN) kicked off the day with an analysis of the Semester process and an overview of the years 2017-18 and 2018-2019. He argued that the Semester appeared to be a very technical exercise but was in reality a very political process with major implications for public services and public service workers. As well as highlighting the content and the evidence of an increased number of country-specific recommendations (CSRs) on social issues, Howard also gave an indication of the extent of the involvement of trade unions which was an important part of the discussion that followed on five country case studies.

Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy and Latvia had been chosen by the project partners for detailed study, providing a good range of countries with very different characteristics in terms of industrial relations, governance and public services. In all five countries there were challenges for trade unions to get properly involved in the process due to the very tight timescale of the Semester but also in relation to proper engagement from the government.

Country case studies

In **Latvia**, EPSU's health affiliate had taken full advantage of the Semester to try to keep pressure on the government to increase health spending. There was disappointment, however, that key points made by the European Commission in its country reports on Latvia were yet to be translated into clear country-specific recommendations to increase spending.

In **Ireland**, the challenge remained to ensure better participation of public service unions and this had now been taken up through discussions between the relevant unions and the national confederation. In this case, there was an opportunity for the unions to put more pressure on the government to reform healthcare as the European Commission was raising similar questions as the unions in relation to the role of private insurance.

In the case of **Denmark**, the CSRs had had very little to say about the public sector and so the focus of trade union concern was more the need to revise the Stability and Growth Pact.

French unions were having to confront a broad range of reforms being implemented by the Macron government, many of which corresponded to the structural reform agenda of the Commission and the CSRs for France. However, there was a feeling that the unions had made some headway with the Commission dropping CSRs that focused on reducing the national minimum wage.

In **Italy**, there had been a shift with around 80% of the latest CSRs now more in line with trade union policy. However, the challenge remained on public finances and while the unions could support CSRs on improving childcare they said that the additional investment needed would be constrained by the Semester's fiscal rules.

Panel debate - more democracy in the Semester

The day ended with a panel debate chaired by Bart Vanhercke (OSE) and featuring Jan Willem Goudriaan (EPSU), Paola Cammilli (ETUCE), Leonard Ebner of the CEMR local government employers, Daniel Wisniewski of the EFEE education employers and Filip Tanay of the Semester co-ordination unit in the European Commission's DG Employment.

The trade union representatives took the opportunity to underline the need for a reform of the fiscal rules to ensure a real shift on social issues in the Semester. Both trade union and employer organisations underlined the need for more time and support to ensure their effective intervention at both national and European levels. They also joined in arguing for a general opening up of the Semester process to make it more democratic with a role for the European Parliament. The message from the Commission was that things are changing and that trade unions should definitely use the opportunity to get their messages across now during this crucial period of preparation for the 2020 Semester.

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