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Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs

Employment and Social Policy

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¹ • Where declarations, conclusions or resolutions have been formally adopted by the Council, this is indicated in the heading for the item concerned and the text is placed between quotation marks.
 • Documents for which references are given in the text are available on the Council's internet site (<http://www.consilium.europa.eu>).
 • Acts adopted with statements for the Council minutes which may be released to the public are indicated by an asterisk; these statements are available on the Council's internet site or may be obtained from the Press Office.

ITEMS DEBATED**The future of social Europe post-2020**

The Council held a policy debate on the future of social Europe post-2020 on the basis of a presidency note ([6326/18](#)).

Ministers had the opportunity to give political orientations regarding the future design and objectives of the EU post-2020 employment and social programmes before the Commission presents the next multiannual financial framework in May.

In particular, they pointed out that in a social Europe citizens should have opportunities for social development and economic growth, with a renewed focus on employment and social convergence.

Implementing the European Pillar of social rights will help further the important process of social convergence and boost job creation, which remains a top priority.

Investing in people, younger and older alike, is essential if we are to eradicate inequalities. People should be given the means to adapt to new challenges and labour market needs – and especially to digitalisation.

They should be offered training opportunities to acquire new skills that respond to the new realities of the workplace.

Member states identified as policy priorities: preparing the workforce for the changes induced by the digital transformation and the future of work; promoting employment, especially for young people and for women; supporting the integration of migrants and refugees; promoting inclusion of the most vulnerable people and combating poverty; and addressing demographic challenges.

Achieving these objectives would require adequate funding from a range of EU programmes and funds, such as the European Social Fund (ESF), the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) and the European Globalisation Adjustment Fund (EGF).

Most member states called for simpler procedures and a reduced administrative burden to bring EU social investments more to the fore. In addition, they called for more flexibility, notably via a geographically targeted and time-relevant response to shocks, and for greater efficiency from the ESF.

Member states also agreed to maintain the current structure of the social funds (ESF, EGF and FEAD), with some calling for the ESF to remain part of EU cohesion policy.

Closing the gender pay gap

The Council discussed how to close the gender pay gap and thus help achieve the goals of the European Pillar of social rights ([6423/18](#)).

The Presidency stressed that the equal pay principle has been part of the European acquis for more than half a century.

Ministers acknowledged that the causes of the gender pay gap are complex and include stereotypes, segregation and secrecy. Equal pay is key to equal participation in the labour market. No one questions the principle of equal pay, but principles must be fully applied, otherwise they will remain ineffectual.

Stereotypes narrow the opportunities for girls and women to study the subjects they want and to do the jobs that interest them.

The gender pay gap is also rooted in structural causes. A whole range of work-life balance measures are needed to make equal access to employment a reality.

Secrecy can be the enemy of fairness. When pay transparency is increased, pay discrepancies become apparent. This is something companies and organisations can easily do.

Closing the pay gap is also an economic win-win which leads to fuller labour participation. This brings more talent and skills onto the labour market. A fairer deal for EU citizens injects a dose of motivation and dynamism into the economy.

Measures to close the gender pay gap are necessary if we are successfully to implement the European Pillar of social rights, as proclaimed by the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission in November 2017.

The ministerial debate follows on from implementation of the Pillar of social rights and the Commission's [action plan on tackling the gender pay gap from last November](#).

European Semester 2018

The Council adopted conclusions on the 2018 annual growth survey and the joint employment report ([7165/18](#)). The survey and the report both take account of the European Pillar of Social Rights, proclaimed in November 2017.

The annual growth survey outlines priority actions for member states to ensure better coordinated and more efficient policies. The aim is to put the EU's economy on a path to sustainable growth.

On employment aspects, the Council adopted the joint employment report ([7168/18](#)).

The Commission presented to the Council an overview of the 2018 country reports.

European framework for quality and effective apprenticeships

The Council adopted a recommendation for a European framework for quality and effective apprenticeships ([7311/18](#)).

The objective of this recommendation is to contribute to a highly skilled and qualified workforce.

This could be achieved by setting common quality and effectiveness criteria for apprenticeships and drawing on them to develop and maintain national apprenticeship schemes.

Apprenticeships, an essential element in the vocational education and training systems, benefit both employers and learners. They strengthen the link between the world of work and the world of education and training.

Quality apprenticeships can also foster active citizenship and social inclusion by bringing people from different social and personal backgrounds into the labour market.

The recommendation contains a range of criteria for learning and working conditions, including the following:

- within a clear and consistent regulatory framework, a written agreement should be concluded to define the rights and obligations of the apprentice, the employer and, where appropriate, of the vocational education and training institution
- there should be a defined set of learning outcomes leading to recognised qualifications
- apprentices should be paid or otherwise compensated
- apprentices should be entitled to social protection
- career guidance, mentoring and learner support should be provided before and during the apprenticeship, to ensure successful outcomes
- pedagogical support should be provided to teachers, trainers and mentors, specially in micro-, small and medium-sized companies.

Youth Guarantee

The Council endorsed the Employment Committee's key messages on implementing the youth guarantee ([6149/18](#)).

According to these key messages, the underlying context for implementing the youth guarantee improved in 2017. The number of young unemployed people and young people not in education, employment or training (sometimes referred to as NEETs) fell, although the picture varied between member states.

The youth guarantee review pointed to considerable progress in implementation since the previous review in December 2015. It also highlighted a shift in approach in several member states, with a stronger focus on upskilling and on support for young people facing multiple disadvantages.

In some member states, the delivery of the youth guarantee is based primarily on individual projects and measures, rather than on an overarching strategy.

Most member states have developed new forms of partnership, which are now central to the implementation of the youth guarantee and should be built upon further.

Outreach to NEETs remains a challenge in many member states, but less so in those that have developed strong incentives for young people to register. Additional efforts are needed in many member states to upscale existing outreach measures.

Any other business

– *Social fairness package*

The Commission informed the Council about the social fairness package, consisting of proposals for a European Labour Authority (regulation) and for a Council recommendation to improve access to social protection. The communication accompanying the package not only details the content but also, at the request of the December EUCO, sets out the Commission's vision for "appropriate" monitoring of the implementation of the Pillar. A further legislative proposal on a European Social Security Number (regulation) will follow later this year.

– *Tripartite Social Summit*

The Presidency and the Commission informed the Council about the next Tripartite Social Summit on 21 March. Its main theme will be "Delivering on the European Pillar of Social Rights" and the three subthemes are "Reinforcing innovation, job creation and social fairness in the Multiannual Financial Framework", "New forms of work: challenges and opportunities for employment and social dialogue" and "Economic and social convergence to strengthen growth and resilience".

– *Employment Committee (EMCO) and Social Protection Committee (SPC) work programmes 2018*

The respective chairs informed the Council about the Employment committee and Social protection committee work programmes for 2018.

– *Revision of Directive 96/71 on Posting of workers*

At the request of the Czech delegation this item was added at the beginning of the session. The Presidency informed the Council on the state of play regarding the ongoing negotiations with the European Parliament. Several member states took the floor to comment on the provisional compromise text before finalisation of the negotiations with the European Parliament.

OTHER ITEMS APPROVED**TRADE****Union for the Mediterranean**

The Council adopted the EU and its member states' position on the draft declaration to be issued as an outcome of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) trade ministerial conference. The conference will be held in Brussels on 19 March under the UfM co-presidency of Cecilia Malmström, EU commissioner for trade, and Yarub Qudah, Jordanian minister for trade.

The declaration highlights the importance of developing further initiatives to facilitate and increase trade and investment flows, as well as to enhance the mutually beneficial economic integration process in the Mediterranean region. It stresses the importance of encouraging economic actors from both sides of the Mediterranean to take greater advantage of the possibilities that the Euro-Mediterranean trade, investment and economic partnership provides.

The UfM promotes economic integration across 15 of the EU's southern neighbours in North Africa, the Middle East and the Balkan region. It was set up in 2008, building on the cooperation formerly known as the "Barcelona process".

DEVELOPMENT

Economic partnership agreement with Ivory Coast

The Council adopted a decision establishing the position to be taken on behalf of the EU within the EU-Ivory Coast economic partnership agreement (EPA) committee, regarding the adoption of the committee's rules of procedure.

The EU has initialled an economic partnership agreement with 16 West African states. Pending the adoption of the regional EPA with West Africa, the "stepping stone EPA" with Ivory Coast entered into provisional application on 3 September 2016. It provides Ivory Coast with free access to the EU market for its goods, in order to contribute to economic growth in the country through trade, investment and employment.

Bilateral trade between Ivory Coast and the EU, its main foreign market, amounts to €6.9 billion.

TRANSPARENCY

Public access to documents

On 15 March 2018, the Council approved the reply to confirmatory application No 01/c/01/18 ([5090/18](#)).
