Question and answers: Strengthening social dialogue

Brussels, 25 January 2023

Why is social dialogue important?

Social dialogue is a cornerstone of the European social model. A strong social Europe requires strong social partners. Research from the International Labour Organization and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development shows that social dialogue is a key driver for economic and social resilience, competitiveness, fairness and sustainable growth. It is crucial in finding balanced solutions in response to changes in the world of work, also in the context of the green and digital transitions, as well as to unexpected crises, by allowing an adjustment of working conditions and ensuring fairness at work.

According to the 2022 Joint Employment Report, more than half of the measures related to active labour market policies and income protection (like short-time work schemes) put in place by Member States since the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak were either agreed by, or negotiated with, social partners.

Social partners also contribute to tackling the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine by facilitating the labour market integration of people fleeing the war. Social dialogue can also help strengthen protection at the workplace, for instance by negotiating and implementing collective agreements like the ongoing negotiations on telework and the right to disconnect from work.

What is the state of play of social dialogue across Member States?

There are variations between Member States regarding the framework, structures, processes and effectiveness of social dialogue, including for collective bargaining. They reflect the countries' different histories and economic and political situations.

Most Member States have a formal national social dialogue set-up, where representatives of employers, trade unions and sometimes the government can discuss general economic and social matters. However, in a number of Member States, social partners lack organisational capacity, which hinders their participation in policymaking and their ability to conclude collective agreements.

In addition, while the share of employers who are members of employers' organisations has remained relatively stable, both union membership and the share of workers covered by collective agreements at national level have declined significantly in the past decades (from an EU average of about 66% in 2000 to about 56% in 2019), in particular in Central and Eastern Europe.

Newer forms of employment, such as platform work, and certain groups, such as young people, are also less likely to be represented.

How does the Commission promote EU social dialogue?

The Commission works closely with European social partners to make sure EU employment and social policies respond to the needs of workers and businesses. The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) outlines the key role of social partners in a social market economy, conferring on them a specific role in EU law-making in the social policy field. Therefore, the Commission consults European social partners on legislative proposals in the social policy area to allow social partners to negotiate agreements, if they so wish (Article 154 TFEU). Agreements of social partners can also be implemented by means of EU law (Article 155 TFEU).

There are well-established cross-industry structures for the EU social dialogue, which include:

- The Tripartite Social Summit for Growth and Employment, which ensures a biannual concertation between the Council, the Commission, and European-level social partners. The Commission President participates in these discussions.
- The Social Dialogue Committee, which is the main forum for cross-industry social dialogue among EU cross-industry social partner organisations. For instance, the EU cross-industry social partners are currently negotiating a new agreement on telework and the right to
The Macroeconomic Dialogue as a forum for the Council, the Commission, the European Central Bank and the Eurogroup to exchange views on monetary and budgetary policies and wage developments with European social partners.

The Employment Committee (EMCO), which organises several seminars with EU and national social partners to discuss topics of particular importance on top of the traditional yearly Social Dialogue review.

The Social Protection Committee (SPC), which regularly involves social partners in its discussions (for example on pensions, long-term care or access to social protection).

At sectoral level, EU social dialogue covers more than 80% of the EU workforce with 43 Sectoral Social Dialogue Committees representing 65 European employers' organisations and 15 European trade union federations. They account for over 185 million workers and over 6 million companies across the EU. Besides agreements, each year European sectoral social partners adopt 30 to 50 joint outcome positions on a wide range of topics, such as health and safety at work, working conditions, the impacts of the transition to climate neutrality, digitalisation, skills, labour mobility or gender equality.

What is the aim of the social dialogue initiative?

Social dialogue plays a key role to find balanced solutions in response to changes in the world of work against the backdrop of the transitions to a digital and climate neutral economy and the emergence of new forms of employment (e.g. platform work). A fragmented workforce and increasing flexibility in terms of time and place of work have made it more difficult for trade unions to represent all groups and create specific structures within organisations.

In terms of gender equality, the proportion of women in trade unions varies strongly across the EU. While there is a general trend of a growing number of women members, they remain underrepresented in leadership positions. Social partners' organisations have taken initiatives to recruit new members or attract underrepresented groups (notably, youth and platform workers) in recent years. However, challenges remain and more could be done to further strengthen social dialogue and harness its full potential to ensure fair transitions.

Against this background, the Commission Communication presented today outlines the EU’s instruments to support national social dialogue and collective bargaining. In addition, the Commission's proposal for a Council Recommendation provides guidance to Member States on how to best promote social dialogue and strengthen collective bargaining with due respect to the competences of the Member States and the autonomy of the social partners.

What type of funding is available from the EU to support Member States in improving social dialogue?

Member States can make use of available EU funding under the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and the Technical Support Instrument.

Member States who received a country-specific recommendation on social dialogue must spend at least 0.25% of their ESF+ funds on supporting the capacity-building of social partners. Other Member States must allocate an appropriate amount of ESF+ resources to this area.

How have social partners been consulted for this initiative?

Social partners have been closely involved in the preparation of the social dialogue initiative. The Commission organised multiple consultation activities, including seminars and a dedicated hearing with social partners at EU level and dedicated meetings with the leaders of the European cross-industry social partner organisations as well as discussions in the Social Dialogue Committee meetings and exchanges with Member State representatives in the Employment Committee. There was a public consultation on the social dialogue initiative, to which the Commission received 61 contributions, more than half of them coming from social partner organisations. The Commission also held exchanges of views with the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions.

How does the initiative ensure that national traditions and autonomy of social partners are respected, while promoting social dialogue?

The proposal for a Council Recommendation builds on essential elements of a well-functioning social dialogue in the European Union: the contractual freedom and autonomy of social partners, respect for national traditions, rules and practices, as well as social partners' autonomy. The proposed Council Recommendation allows Member States to determine how to best achieve its objectives in line with their national circumstances. Member States may entrust social partners with the implementation of
the relevant parts of this Recommendation, in accordance with national law or practice where applicable.

**For More Information**

- **Press release: Commission sets out concrete actions for greater involvement of social partners at national and EU level**
- **Proposal for a Council Recommendation on strengthening social dialogue in the European Union**
- **Communication on strengthening social dialogue in the European Union—harnessing its full potential for managing transitions**
- **2023 European Year of Skills**

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