High Level Conference: A new start for social dialogue
5 March 2015
UEAPME President Gunilla Almgren – Introductory speaking note

Prime Minister,
Commissioners,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first congratulate Commissioners Dombrovskis and Thyssen for organising this High Level Event in the same year as the celebration of 30 years of Val Duchesse, the very first start of the EU Social Dialogue.

For UEAPME, we are celebrating our 16 years of Social Dialogue. We joined the team at the time when the European Social Dialogue became more mature and Social Partners decided to prove their autonomy with the adoption of their first Work Programme.

We very much hope to be able to adopt soon our 5th work programme.

It was also the time of the Lisbon Strategy, the first integrated strategy with a new role for the EU Social Dialogue. It than never stopped evolving in content, role and tools developed. Today Social dialogue has become a full component of our Social market economy.

**We are now at a new crossroads.**

After enlargement, globalisation and the economic and social crisis, new challenges are ahead of us for the economy and the society as a whole, not least reducing the high unemployment level.

Economies have become more complex and competition more globalised. Being more competitive towards the outside world is the best way to generate inclusive growth and more jobs leading to higher social cohesion in Europe.

The economic governance with the EU Semester created a new momentum for Social Partners to actively contribute to the recovery, if they are full involved.
Businesses, not least small enterprises and their workers need to adapt to these changes. European and national policy makers regularly underline the importance of crafts-trades and SMEs for job creation, vocational training and social stability as key elements to overcome the current employment crisis in Europe.

Let me add Competitiveness as the top priority for SMEs to invest and create growth and jobs. Improving competitiveness does not only mean wage moderation. Innovation, investment in human capital, cutting red tape and promoting adaptability are some of the major components. This is why a new Small Business Act should become the yard stick for an effective SME policy included in country specific recommendations.

But it cannot be achieved without the support of workers and their representatives. SMEs and their workers will be of crucial importance for the creation of more dynamism, welfare and social stability. And the partners in SME working relations and their social dialogue have to play their role.

There is a need to find new models for co-operation between social partners, on different levels and new topics, to meet the current recovery challenges and ensure a better functioning of labour markets.

There is also a clear need to support stakeholders’ capacity and in particular Crafts and SMEs organisations.

UEAPME members have more difficulties than larger organisations to be well represented and to have sufficient resources for being pro-active social partners. European support for SME capacity building would be an investment with a high social and economic return on investment.

Such a reinforced capacity would also reflect their major role in terms of jobs created and their 60% of total employment in Europe.

These are the conditions for SMEs to positively contribute to a new start of the social dialogue. I wish to all of us a fruitful discussion.

06/03/15
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