



"The voice of crafts and SMEs in Europe"

Full involvement of SME organisations a must for sectoral social dialogue

SMEs call for more capacity building measures and political support at seminar with Commissioner Andor

Brussels, 16 September 2010 – Stronger political support must be given to SME representatives who wish to actively participate in the European sectoral social dialogue, while SME organisations further from the process must be better encouraged to get involved. Only by doing so Europe will ensure that "Sectoral Social Dialogue Committees" are fully representative of its economy and that their results and adopted agreements are supported and implemented by all companies throughout the Union. This was the consensus at a high-level seminar on "Sector policy, social dialogue and SMEs" organised yesterday (Wednesday) by UEAPME, the European craft and SME employers' organisation, featuring Commissioner László Andor and speakers from the transport and construction sectors. At the event, UEAPME unveiled a policy statement (1) that highlights the main challenges for crafts and SMEs in the field. While recognising their own responsibilities to increase the level of interest and improve the structural capacity of SME sectoral organisations, UEAPME and its members also called on the European Commission to back SMEs by strongly supporting awareness raising and capacity building initiatives, as well as by providing its political support to fully integrate them in the EU sectoral social dialogue.

"While SMEs are now a fully recognised and independent actor in the European cross-industry social dialogue, their participation at sectoral level remains marginal", stressed UEAPME President Georg Toifl at the seminar. "Without putting into question the principles of autonomy, representativeness and mutual recognition, it is clear that more must be done to enable all representative SME organisations to enter the sectoral social dialogue arena. This means removing the obstacles that stand on the way of those further from the process, by raising their awareness and increasing their capacity. But it also means ensuring that the voice of stronger, active sectoral SME organisations is heard in the existing Sectoral Social Dialogue Committees, which act too often as 'closed shops' and remain reluctant to taking new members on board."

More than 40 European Sectoral Social Dialogue (SSD) Committees were created in the last 12 years, and the European Commission intends to cover 100% of the European economy with SSD Committees in the future. However, bar a few exceptions, SME representatives have not really achieved to play any significant role so far. While the rapid growth of Sectoral Social Dialogue Committees and their potential are clearly impressive, the lack of SME participation is a worrying prospect that must be addressed, speakers agreed. In fact, the decisions taken by SSD Committees are relevant for SMEs and should therefore be taken with their full participation. Moreover, SSD Committees should mirror the real economy and cannot neglect that the vast majority of enterprises in Europe is made of SMEs, they stressed.

Several objective reasons can explain the current state of affairs, such as the relative weakness of most European sectoral SME and craft structures, which must be supported and encouraged, and the proximity of employers and employees working in small businesses, which makes it less compelling to set up a formalised social dialogue with workers' unions.

While these obstacles can and should be addressed at European level, political support for SME participation in SSD Committees must also be increased, stressed Secretary General **Andrea Benassi** in his closing remarks. *"The European cross-industry social dialogue has proved its worth, whereas the potential of the European sectoral social dialogue is largely untapped. The European Commission's determination to promote sectoral social dialogue is therefore laudable, especially in times of economic and social crisis, when shared solutions are crucial. However, sectoral social dialogue will be a missed opportunity if representative SME organisations are not included as a full-fledged actor. We are willing to do our part, and we trust that the Commission will throw all its weight behind us to change the status quo",* he concluded.

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(1) http://www.ueapme.com/IMG/pdf/100915_statement_SSD.pdf

EDITORS' NOTES: UEAPME is the employers' organisation representing exclusively crafts, trades and SMEs from the EU and accession countries at European level. UEAPME has 85 member organisations covering over 12 million enterprises with 55 million employees. UEAPME is a European Social Partner. For further information: <http://www.ueapme.com/>

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