



European Economic and Social Committee

CONFERENCE
Human rights in the workplace
Brussels, 2 and 3 December 2002

S P E E C H

by

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Brussels, 2 December 2002

Seul le texte prononcé fait foi

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

As President of the European Economic and Social Committee, I am pleased to welcome you to the inaugural session of this conference on human rights in the workplace, which brings us together over the course of today and tomorrow. I wish to extend a particularly warm welcome to our friends and colleagues from Africa, the Caribbean, the Pacific, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, Latin America and Asia, who have come to Brussels to meet with their European partners and representatives of the institutions attending this conference.

This conference is extremely important to me on a personal level – not only because it is the first conference I have had the honour to chair since taking up my new role – but also because the issue of human rights in the workplace is particularly dear to me owing to my long-standing involvement both with the trades union movement and - as some of you will be aware - with the activities of the International Labour Organisation.

I would like to begin by sharing with you a story about the origins of this conference. In November 1999 I found myself trapped in my hotel along with several colleagues from the Committee who were also taking part in the Seattle Ministerial Conference. **President Clinton** was in town, there had been some trouble the previous day, and the police had imposed a curfew. I had experienced several curfews in my life, although never before in the United States, but on this strange evening the suspicion of the developing countries, their point-blank refusal to discuss social issues, and President Clinton's highly damaging reference to the possible use of trade sanctions to impose social standards, combined to create an uneasy atmosphere.

Since our return from Seattle, we have acknowledged the importance of engaging in dialogue on the promotion of core labour standards (specifically, freedom of association and effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining, the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour, genuine abolition of child labour and the elimination of discrimination in labour and occupation) today recognised as universal. Naturally, then, I was delighted when, in October 2000, **Commissioner Lamy** (European Trade Commissioner) asked the EESC to draw up an opinion on human rights in the workplace, using its network of contacts within the European Union and in third countries.

I believe that we delivered in full. **Mr Putzhammer**, the rapporteur, and **Mr Gafo Fernández**, co-rapporteur, drew up a high quality opinion, managing to find common ground between the highly divergent viewpoints which – even within the European Union – exist on this particularly sensitive issue. Although they are not with us today, I wish personally to thank those two members of our Committee, who have demonstrated the virtues of constructive dialogue and proved that consensus is not necessarily synonymous with a lack of conviction and ideas.

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The Committee has also endeavoured to initiate a dialogue on these matters with its partners in the southern countries, and in this connection has organised a number of meetings and hearings in which several of you have taken part. Such meetings have taken place in Egypt, under the aegis of the Euromed Partnership, in the Dominican Republic, with the representatives of economic and social players from the Caribbean in May 2001, in Geneva, with trade union and employers' organisations from African, Asian and Latin American countries in June 2001, in Chile, with representatives of a number of Latin American countries in November 2001, and in Kenya, with representatives of East African countries in February 2002.

Overall – and I think that these two days will confirm this view – we have shown that it is possible to hold a dialogue on these thorny questions – a dialogue between all economic and social players and between north and south. We have demonstrated, and will continue to demonstrate, the important role that civil society can play both in complementing the work of governments and even, on occasion, in spearheading progress, through our capacity both for dialogue and for confrontation, combined with our ability to reach agreement at times when our governments refuse to talk.

Without wishing to pre-empt any conclusions that might emerge from these two days, I would nonetheless like to suggest a number of ideas that I hope will help to shape your discussions.

- The question of human rights in the workplace must be examined as part of an overall approach to promote sustainable development

I believe that with regard to north-south relations, it is essential that we consider this issue in conjunction with that of poverty reduction and development policy in general. I wish to make it clear that I roundly condemn all forms of child labour, but I am also well aware that in the interests not only of credibility but also of effectiveness, this condemnation must go hand in hand with aid for education policy and specific action to create jobs for adults. I am convinced that the tools of development policy, used in such a way, can play an important role in promoting core labour standards.

- We must address, as a matter of urgency, the growing imbalance, noted by **Kofi Annan** in his Millennium Summit report, between the development of rules facilitating the expansion of global markets and the attention accorded to equally important social objectives.

In other words, while market governance is gaining in strength – a development which is to be broadly welcomed – social governance, despite the efforts of the ILO, to which I pay tribute, has yet to be achieved. We must thus concentrate further efforts on promoting this social dimension of globalisation. In this regard, I am extremely keen to hear what **Mr Perigot**, one of the eminent members of the Working Group on the Social Dimension of Globalisation, set up on the initiative of the Director-General of the ILO, will say when he speaks to us in a few minutes.

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- The importance of the Neither/Nor rule: neither sanctions nor protectionism

The European Economic and Social Committee – and indeed the European Union as a whole – rejects any approach based on sanctions. The idea of using incentives to promote social standards, however, does merit discussion.

It is also important for the European Union that the link between trade and social issues is not manipulated to serve protectionist ends. We do not, therefore, wish to challenge the comparative advantage that low wages represent for your countries, a matter about which concerns are sometimes voiced.

- The European Union has a major role to play in developing a social dimension of globalisation

Firstly, the Union itself is founded on respect for fundamental rights. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, proclaimed at Nice in December 2000, reiterates the fundamental objective of the EU of promoting and integrating fully fundamental rights – including core labour standards – in all of its policies and actions. Furthermore, our model of development, based on social and environmental considerations and on the participation and consultation of representatives of organised civil society interests and attracts people in the southern countries. Some of you, particularly those from Latin America, will be well aware of the fact that this model is in competition, and sometimes in conflict, with the American model.

I am sure that the representative of the European Union Council Presidency, **Mr Claus Hjort Frederiksen**, will reiterate the European Union's firm commitment to promoting core standards. On behalf of the European Economic and Social Committee, I can assure you that we will continue to strive for progress in this area. Indeed, this is a subject where the Committee, as the representative of the economic and social players in European organised civil society, can make a major contribution.

The quest for social governance against the backdrop of globalisation – this, then, will be the real issue that we, members of the EESC and representatives of socio-occupational organisations from different continents and of a range of European and international organisations, will discuss over the course of the next two days.

You are among friends here, and I therefore ask you to be bold and to demonstrate your commitment and conviction. Take as your starting point the words of **Boutros Boutros-Ghali**: unless we democratise globalisation, globalisation will distort democracy.

Thank you for your attention.

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