

Biography of Mario Sepi

From trade union activism to campaigning for the European social model

Background to a European calling: Young Federalists

My background has been intertwined with the Committee's since the 1960s when I became intimately aware of European issues and developed a strong interest in social Europe, as a result of my experience in the European federalist movement (the Young Federalists) as secretary of the Rome chapter.

From 1966, as researcher at the IAI (International Affairs Institute), I dealt with social and trade union policy in Europe and so had the opportunity to learn about and work with the Committee in the capacity of expert on relations with the Mediterranean countries, from 1969 to 1974.

As fate had it, my first task in this institute, led by Altiero Spinelli, was to prepare an essay on the role of the Economic and Social Committee.

In the 1970s and 1980s I focused on the CISL's trade union activity, first as international policy expert and then as national secretary of the FIM (Italian Metalworkers' Federation), with responsibility for industrial and contractual policy.

Having focused the lion's share of my attention at that time on the importance of the aeronautic and automobile sectors, I helped bring the union to the table to sign the 1984 FIAT agreement, which turned the page on the long crisis begun in the wake of the struggles of 1980.

This agreement made it possible to bring workers who had remained outside the company back into the fold and was a major victory for trade union negotiations at a time when workers had to fight for rights and decisive social shifts were occurring in Italy and Europe.

A central idea in trade union action: social development

From then on, throughout my career in the union I endeavoured to follow one guiding principle: commitment to a specific idea of social development.

This is also one of the purposes of the Economic and Social Committee; the Treaty of Rome, establishing the Committee in 1958, entrusted it from its inception with the key task of developing the European social model.

Championing social development was the inspiration behind my next steps in the field of international cooperation when, in the early 1990s, I became director of the ISCOS (Trades Union Institute for Development Cooperation).

While in office, I dealt with a number of projects with developing countries, working with cooperation institutions at Italian and European level and ensuring that relations with third countries were carried out in the spirit of equal development of civil society between north and south.

My efforts to promote cooperation with countries such as Mozambique, Mali, Chile and Brazil focused on training, retraining for professional activities geared towards self-fulfilment, promotion of cooperation between the social categories of the various economic sectors and the commitment to ensure trade union freedoms.

With particular reference to Brazil, I played an active role in the anti-dictatorship struggle led by the now president Lula, being heavily involved in training at the trade union school set up in Belo Horizonte, the site of the local FIAT factory.

Furthermore, the fact that I have spent my working life in European trade union organisations such as the FEM (European Metalworkers' Federation) means that my career has always centred around Europe and that I have fostered national trade union participation in the European movement, helping to overcome divisions and ideological barriers to be united in Europe.

At the Economic and Social Committee

I joined the Committee in 1995 and in 2002 was elected president of the Employees' Group (Group II).

Within the Committee, I have directed the bulk of my energy towards studying economic issues and European economic and social policy.

One of the most important opinions for which I have been rapporteur was the 2002 own-initiative opinion on Trends, structures and institutional mechanisms of the international capital markets.

Other themes which have been a recurrent feature in my opinions include competition policy, European industrial policy and monetary union – participating in the study group which prepared the Committee opinion on EMU and industrial relations – and the Lisbon Strategy.

I now have the honour of crowning my achievements with the role of Committee president for the next two years.

I have already described my presidency's priorities and in conclusion I would like to convey these in terms of the two key institutional objectives which will ensure that the Committee genuinely looks towards the future: the new Lisbon Strategy after 2010 and the affirmation of the new European Treaty, which proposes more rights and greater participation.

I hope that it is now relatively clear how my background has shaped my ambitions for the 2008-2010 presidency. However, it is the Committee's history which I intend to use as a springboard to achieve these objectives, merging our paths to ensure progress, innovation and further achievements.

As I move on from a role on one "side" to which I have belonged throughout my career in the Committee to take on overall responsibility, I am fully aware of the difficulties facing me but I am heartened by the good relationship I have established with the members of every Committee group.

To contact Mr Mario Sepi:

email: mario.sepi@eesc.europa.eu

Tel: +32-2-546.92.97

Fax: +32-2-546.97.52

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European Economic and Social Committee



Rights and solidarity to guide globalisation

PRESIDENT MARIO SEPI 2008-2010

Mario Sepi's presidential message

Rights and solidarity to guide globalisation

Solidarity: sharing a common project

The concept of solidarity is often confined to the realm of emotions; it may be individual or collective but is inevitably associated with choice, unilateralism and the decision to take one action over another.

My presidency slogan, Rights and solidarity to guide globalisation, refers to a different concept of solidarity, which has been taking form throughout the course of European history. It implies reciprocity and give and take, care for other people and active sharing.

This concept excludes a number of terms that have established themselves in our vocabulary, such as the distinction made in international cooperation between donor and developing countries, and which also permeates charity or compassionate conservatism.

Solidarity does not mean some giving and others receiving, and even less is a matter of pity and compassion, in which some decide and others wait in resignation – it recognises only the sharing of unequal situations in one common project.

Solidarity given tangible legal form

Over the centuries, this concept has found expression in national organisations, legal precedents and substantive law. This has brought about a shift from spontaneous charity by those in power to rights for those without power. This qualitatively different view of solidarity which has evolved over the last few centuries and taken shape in law, instruments for redistribution (taxation systems, collective bargaining, the welfare state) and the pursuit of equality has been given tangible form in the European social model. This social model is both one of the reasons for the existence of our civilisation and the driving force behind its development.

Solidarity as an instrument for competitiveness

The paradox lies in the fact that this concept of solidarity does not focus exclusively on quality, an idea of society or a raft of values underpinning our civilisation: it is also a tool to promote competitiveness in the challenging climate of globalisation.

Seen in this light, solidarity is able to force the economy to pick up the pace towards a form of development revolving around quality, raising the overall level of economic and social processes, making society more stable and preventing the social and environmental disasters which would result should the pursuit of competitiveness be seen solely in terms of cost control and social conflicts.

The pursuit of solidarity does not put us on a collision course with globalisation.

Globalisation is an ongoing process, while solidarity is the set of actions and objectives which make it possible to realise the potential inherent in economic and social development: the growth of civilisation and equality for all.

President Mario Sepi: 2008-2010

Summary of the programme

After the Committee's first half century

The fact that the start of my presidency coincides with the European Economic and Social Committee's 50th anniversary confers upon me a twofold responsibility: to capitalise on the history of the Committee, while at the same time ensuring that the Committee looks to the future.

The EESC's 50th anniversary also falls in the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue.

The EESC has a key role to play in this respect: as the voice of organised civil society, it is a microcosm and a mirror of social and cultural differences.

It is an institutional forum in which civil society stakeholders propose solutions agreed as part of their consultative role of providing support for the EU's legislative and executive institutions.

Looking ahead to the EESC after 2008, we must build on its great potential in terms of:

- promoting change in our societies
- defending the European social model.

Assessing the consequences of policies on our societies

As my slogan suggests, I intend to direct the Committee's work towards solidarity and rights.

Although brief, two years is an ideal length of time to consolidate certain commitments and imprint a vision which looks to the future and to a stronger role for the Committee in the EU architecture.

In order to ensure that the Committee reflects the views of society, we must promote assessments of the real impact of European policies when applied to our societies.

A prerequisite for this is knowing about the consequences of European decisions as soon as possible.

Through its members and their organisations, the Committee has access to an excellent network through which it can assess the grassroots impact of directives and European policies and we must ensure that we make proper use of it.

Only in this way will the Committee be able to perform its function of not only of supporting the European institutions in their decision-making, but also of providing answers at national and organisational level to the question: what are the implications of this decision for the various sectors of society? What is the impact on industrial relations? What are the consequences for social and civil progress in individual countries?

Three key priorities

The Treaty of Lisbon includes a series of articles reinforcing **participatory democracy**.

It is primarily the responsibility of the Committee to explore ways in which these articles may be applied effectively, by stepping up its role in the consultative process, making full use of the popular right of initiative and putting the requirement to consult and inform civil society into practice in secondary legislation.

The deep fault lines running through our society and the breakdown that we are currently witnessing of social pacts employers, trade unions and governments, make an improvement in the quality of the economic fabric imperative.

The second priority is therefore the **Lisbon Strategy**.

This strategy is fundamental: cooperation with the other institutions to tackle the issues of modernisation, the knowledge-based society, international competition, research and the rights of Europeans as citizens and as workers is the key to contributing to the renewal of society.

The time is right to submit new proposals to the institutions, the Member States, the social partners and the other organisations with links to the Committee.

The principle aim of these new proposals is to revitalize European production but this is impossible without better protection of rights and living conditions.

This leads us to the third priority: **rights** and the European social model.

From the struggle to ensure the entry into force of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU to the struggle to ensure its effective application at every level.

The new "social pact" made up of the Charter and the Treaty of Lisbon must become practical policy and the first step towards achieving this is to bring the social agenda up to date. Clarifying labour law and defining the relationship between European and national or contractual provisions is vital if European citizens are to regain legal and social certainty.

Conveying a strong message: the importance of communication

In parallel, the Committee must develop an effective internal and external communication strategy: timeliness, efficiency and policy content must be the watchwords for the official communication activities of a modern Economic and Social Committee.

Tapping into current political debates must be a priority for the Committee.

Communication must be based on the objective facts, and be capable of demonstrating that the Committee can deal properly and promptly with issues flowing from the institutional debate.

As regards external communication, we need to aim towards a strategy which dovetails into the activity of the other European institutions to enhance cooperation and the Committee's influence within the sphere of its prerogatives.