

INFORMATION

S O C I A L P O L I C Y

IMPROVING LIVING AND WORKING CONDITIONS

51/73 C

The EEC Commission has approved and sent to the Council of Ministers a Social Action Programme, as requested by the Paris Summit Conference in October 1972. One of the three priority themes of this programme is improving living and working conditions.

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IMPROVING LIVING AND WORKING CONDITIONS

A. INTRODUCTION

The Paris Summit Conference of the Heads of State or Government, held in October 1972, decided that the Community should adopt a comprehensive Social Action Programme by 1st. Jan. 1973. The leaders of the Nine "emphasised that they attached as much importance to vigorous action in the social field as to the achievement of economic and monetary union".

They added that "economic expansion is not an end in itself. Its firm aim should be to enable disparities in living conditions to be reduced... It should result in an improvement of the quality of life as well as in standards of living.

The EEC Commission, after extensive consultations with the member states, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee, trade unions, employers, has submitted to the Council of Ministers, for action by the end of 1973, proposals for a Social Action Programme.

The Commission's proposals consist of some 40 different actions, to be undertaken in 1974-76, aiming at :

- Full and better employment;
- Improving living and working conditions;
- Giving trade unions and employers a greater say in the social and economic decision-making processes within the Community.

B. THE COMMISSION'S POLICY

The Commission believes that the improvement of living and working conditions ought to be the ultimate objective of all policy within the Community. While much of the Social Action Programme is focussed on relations and conditions in the workplace, social policy affects in reality all aspects of life.

The Commission considers that safeguarding and strengthening the family, the basic cell of social life, is of prime importance.

All the policies of the Social Action Programme contribute to this aim.

Improving living conditions and the quality of life does not solely depend on increases in incomes and social benefits important though these are. It requires in addition a courageous policy of investment in social services and amenities to satisfy the needs of modern society. The Social Action Programme calls therefore for a high priority to be given to the creation of child care facilities for working mothers, amenities and services for migrant workers, handicapped persons, elderly persons, etc...

C. THE COMMISSION'S PROPOSALS

As regards wages and working conditions, the Commission believes that there are certain guidelines which, in the interests of social progress (and the equilisation of competitive conditions), should be recognised as basis objectives to be achieved as quickly as possible.

As a first step the Commission is submitting immediate proposals to the Council regarding the 40-hour week and four week's annual holiday and the stricter enforcement of the principle of equal pay. Further follow-up action is also envisaged for the implementation of the principle of equal pay.

The establishment of basic wage minima should also, in the Commission's view, be recognised as a basic objective.

There is a need for more systematic information on the distribution of income and assets throughout the Community. The Commission will draw up a comprehensive list of the various measures in operation or planned in the member States with a view for formulating appropriate proposals on asset formation. The present structure of social benefits vary widely within Member States. The Commission has no intention of recommending a uniform Community system, or to seek to eliminate the many disparities resulting from different national priorities, needs and values. At the same time, the Commission has a clear duty to seek to establish minimum standards of social protection capable of being regularly improved. There are certain underprivileged groups within the Community (e.g. handicapped, the elderly and the migrants) the improvement of whose conditions are, by any reckoning, a social priority.

The Commission attaches considerable importance to examining the possibility for ensuring that social benefits rise in line with increases in the standard of living.

The Commission proposes furthermore to study the co-ordination of social security schemes to assist migrant workers, the self-employed and other groups at present either not covered or inadequately provided for.

Better information is needed on present and foreseeable conditions in the Member States in order to establish priorities in the sphere of social protection. Hence the need for the European Social Budget and the further development of the system of social indicators.

The Commission recognises that quite apart from the measures proposed in this programme to deal with particular aspects and causes of poverty, there will still remain pockets of chronic poverty which are unacceptable in an advanced society. In each Member State there exists a neglected minority of chronically poor such as the "unemployable", families on exceptionally low incomes, and fatherless families. Because they are unable to help themselves or in many cases to respond to the help being offered them, these groups find themselves trapped in an almost inescapable cycle of poverty. The rehabilitation of these people and their families is primarily the responsibility of the Member States. However, the Commission believes that it can help the Member States to identify the problem and methods of solution through pilot studies and experiments involving social workers, psychiatrists and vocational guidance experts.

Not all social problems are caused by financial hardship. This is particularly true of the aged. In addition to providing for their material well-being there is the equally serious problem of loneliness and isolation. This question is attracting growing public concern in the Community and each Member State is at present seeking solutions. The Commission believes it can play a useful supporting role and, as a first step, is completing a study of the social problems of the aged in the Community. The conclusions of this report will provide a basis from which new Community initiatives can be developed.

One of the outstanding problems in the Community at present is that a number of industries, because of their unattractive working conditions

are tending to become "ghetto" areas reserved for migrants. Among these are industries demanding large scale repetitive work, including assembly line industries such as motor car manufacture. These industries are already conscious of the need to remove, as far as possible, the monotony of work by techniques of job enrichment, if they are to have a future in a world of full employment where the worker is no longer driven by economic necessity to accept whatever job he can get. The Commission intends to encourage such efforts by all means possible, in accordance with the need to improve the quality of working life.

Equally important are measures to eradicate dangers and nuisances at work. The Commission is making immediate proposals to the Council for establishment of a general committee for industrial safety before the end of 1974. Improvements are needed in the statistics for industrial accidents. In the field of radiation protection, further measures are envisaged to extend the existing safety and health programme.

In the view of the Commission the proposed Foundation for the Improvement of the environment and living and working conditions will have a vital role to play in the understanding of problems in the environmental field and in analysing possible solutions.

This Foundation will be able to concentrate on research into the fundamental long-term problems of creating a European environment in which our people will be happy to live.

The Commission feels that the time has come for the Community institutions to take up certain wider problems in the health field. In all member States, there are emerging aspects of public health which justify coordination such, for example, as health protection for the foreign workers and their families, prevention of mental and psycho-somatic illness related to working and living conditions and a wider approach to the prevention and care of social diseases.

Finally, no programme to improve living and working conditions can afford to ignore the question of public sector housing. This is partly a question of helping particular underprivileged groups (elderly, handicapped, migrants), partly of seeing what can be done to pool the experiences of the member States to control the costs and improve the efficiency of housing construction. The Commission, profiting from

its successful experience in housing in the ECSC field intends to establish immediately pilot projects aimed at public sector housing for the underprivileged, and low income groups, and subsequently to prepare an Action Programme for housing at Community level.

D. CONCLUSION

Such are the Commission's proposals. It is now up to the Council of Ministers to take action on them. If the Council is to respect the deadline laid down by the Paris Summit, it must do so before 1st. Jan.74.