



"The voice of crafts and SMEs in Europe"

Renewed social agenda: a forward-looking approach with some limits

SMEs welcome integrated approach but express mixed feelings on equal treatment and non-discrimination legislation

Brussels, 2 July 2008 – The "Renewed social agenda" presented by the European Commission today is a step in the right direction towards the right balance between the economic and social pillars of the Lisbon agenda, according to UEAPME, the European craft and SME employers' organisation. UEAPME welcomed the holistic approach taken by the Commission to tackle social and societal challenges through a variety of legislative and non-legislative tools. It also praised the EU commitment to support Member States in their efforts for reforms in the fields of pensions, health and education. UEAPME was pleased by the particular focus put by the EC on the need to invest more on youth, skills and employability to improve inclusive labour markets, although it would have preferred a stronger focus on flexicurity and active labour market policies. Moreover, it criticised the initiative to review the existing rules on equal treatment for the self-employed. Finally, it warned against new burdens and costs for SMEs possibly arising, even indirectly, from a new directive to tackle discrimination in all its forms.

"We largely share the analysis and most of the ideas put on the table today by the EC to respond to the rapid and unprecedented social and economic changes Europe is undergoing. However, the EC got carried away on some aspects of this exercise", said Liliane Volozinskis, Director for Social Policy, who went on to elaborate on UEAPME's remarks.

On the positive side, the Commission recognised the need to deepen the reflections on the future of social Europe starting from youth and demographic change. Education and training play a crucial role in this respect: the number of school leavers and the illiteracy ratio must be dramatically reduced, while child poverty must be tackled. Secondly, the renewed social agenda rightly points out the need to develop "new skills for new jobs", said Ms Volozinskis, who welcomed the EC's announcement of a new "jobs and skills strategy" to ensure the necessary synergies between employment, training and education policies. Lifelong learning must be further promoted taking into account the specific needs of Europe's crafts and SMEs, which currently suffer from a lack of workforce and of qualified staff although unemployment remains unacceptably high for categories such as young people, women and older workers. However, the EC should have placed greater emphasis on the application at national level of the "common flexicurity principles" agreed upon last year.

On the negative side, UEAPME disagreed with the Commission's decision to propose new legislation on self-employed women and helping spouses. While much remains to be done in this field, national policymakers should make greater use of the current EU legal framework to improve the situation. *"Announcing new EU rules will not help in enhancing the status of self-employed female entrepreneurs and assisting spouses or in increasing women's entrepreneurship. Concrete implementation measures at national and local level, on the other hand, would go a long way towards creating the right conditions. It is clearly up to Member States to make a difference",* stressed Ms Volozinskis.

UEAPME also expressed its concerns on the risk to create new burdens and additional costs for SMEs arising from the Commission's initiative to present a Directive to tackle discrimination beyond the workplace, which explicitly covers "access to goods and services" and puts the burden of proof on the alleged offender. *"One week ago, the European Commission promised to 'think small first' and to reduce administrative burdens in its Small Business Act – unfortunately, today's initiative on non-discrimination risks going in a completely different direction",* commented Ms Volozinskis.

Finally, UEAPME reconfirmed its full commitment to the European Social Dialogue. *"As the Commission reaffirmed today, social partners have an important role to play in devising adequate responses to the changing social realities, and their work has proved its worth so far. UEAPME is ready to contribute to the renewed social agenda through further agreements and joint actions with the other European Social Partners",* concluded Ms Volozinskis.

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EDITORS' NOTES: UEAPME is the employers' organisation representing exclusively crafts, trades and SMEs from the EU and accession countries at European level. UEAPME has 86 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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