



"The voice of crafts and SMEs in Europe"

EC "family package": SMEs wary on maternity leave, pleased on self-employed workers

Brussels, 3 October 2008 – UEAPME, the European craft and SME employers' organisation, expressed concerns on the European Commission's initiative to revise the EU directive on maternity leave announced today (Friday). UEAPME was particularly wary of the European Commission's proposal to extend the duration of the minimum period of maternity leave in the EU27 from 14 to 18 weeks. There is no evidence that the current rules are not sufficient, said UEAPME, which stressed that the EC initiative will create new difficulties and costs for small employers and called for a broader approach on work-life balance combining other forms of leave, affordable child-care facilities and flexible working arrangements. UEAPME also criticised the timing of the initiative, which might jeopardise the European Social Partners' negotiations on the revision of the existing parental leave directive. On the positive side, UEAPME appreciated the efforts made by the European Commission to present a new reasonable directive on equal treatment between self-employed men and women, which rightly gives assisting spouses the possibility to request the same level of protection enjoyed by self-employed workers.

"Small businesses fully support a good work-life balance approach and certainly agree with the need to protect the health of pregnant workers and women who recently gave birth. However, today's proposed changes will do little in this respect, and may actually turn out to be counterproductive", said Director for Social Affairs **Liliane Volozinskis**. *"There is no evidence that the current rules on maternity leave are insufficient to protect the health of such workers",* she continued.

First of all, stressed Ms Volozinskis, the role of the EU in this policy area is to adopt minimum requirements, which then Member States are free to increase and adapt to the national situation. The rules in place already provide a good protection and facilitate the return of women on the labour market. Their revision is therefore not justified, commented Ms Volozinskis. Secondly, the new rules should increase the health and safety of recently pregnant workers. There is no evidence that this will be the case, said Ms Volozinskis, and in case of health problems or multiple births the existing rules already rightly foresee some leeway. Thirdly, the proposal to increase the minimum level of payment during maternity leave falls outside the EC remit on health and safety and will add new burdens on employers and social protection systems. Fourthly, reconciling work and family life cannot be limited to maternity leave. A broader approach is needed, and should be based on the right balance between all forms of leave, including maternity and parental leave, and other essential elements that require more attention. *"Women workers who recently gave birth must count on affordable childcare facilities and flexible working arrangements, regardless of whether they come back to work after 14 or after 18 weeks. Extending maternal leaves is a simplistic answer to a much more complicated question",* said Ms Volozinskis.

UEAPME also voiced concerns on the EC proposal to require written evidence from the employer that the dismissal of a worker returning from maternity leave is not linked to motherhood. This will impose additional obligations and costs and could actually create reluctance to hire female employers, stressed Ms Volozinskis. Moreover, UEAPME criticised the timing of the EC package, which comes shortly after the European employers' organisations have started their negotiations with the European trade unions on the revision of the current rules on parental leave. This new proposal will have an impact on the ongoing negotiations, warned Ms Volozinskis, since the two topics are clearly interrelated.

On the positive side, the European Commission came up today with a new directive on equal treatment between self-employed men and women that repeals and substitutes the current rules. The new text gives Member States reasonable room for manoeuvre and allows assisting spouses to request a level of protection comparable to a self-employed worker in the same country. UEAPME believes that the Commission chose the right approach to this very sensitive topic.

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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 88 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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