

Opening speech 30th UNI Europa Executive Committee

Speech by Deputy Prime Minister Pierre-Yves Dermagne

17 October 2023

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In ten weeks' time, Belgium will take over the European Presidency from Spain.

And this Presidency will be a special one, as it will take place just a few months before the elections, and therefore the opening of a new EU legislature.

But this will also be a special time because of the major challenges we face:

- Every day we see more and more of the - varied! - of new technologies on our daily lives and the way we work.
- We are feeling the effects of climate change more than ever.
- And we are facing many geopolitical challenges.

And in this context, as Minister for Employment, my priority is to prepare the European social model for these new realities, and to strengthen its resilience. This is vital! It's vital, in fact!

While we can be proud of the fact that Europe has built the best social environment in the world, this environment is not yet complete! As we know, social inequalities remain significant and worrying, and new vulnerabilities have emerged. To combat this and to make further progress, our compass remains the same: it's the European Foundation of Social Rights and the objectives we associated with it in Porto in 2021. They form the basis on which we must write the social chapter of the Strategic Agenda for the new legislature.

We'll be working on this under the Belgian Presidency!

Not least in the context of the Social Summit in La Hulpe. At La Hulpe, we will be bringing together, on the model of Porto, the key players who will be shaping the social Europe of tomorrow. Our Europe, like the world, is in transition. That's a fact! And if Europeans are not to perceive this development as a threat, we must ensure that this transition is fair.

Social dialogue has a central role to play in this. Significant progress has been made in recent years. The recent adoption of the recommendation on social dialogue and the ongoing discussion on democracy at work are promising. As for the adoption of the directive on the minimum wage, it is historic! And I am convinced that its transposition will have a positive knock-on effect on wages and the development of collective bargaining.

During the Belgian Presidency, I will therefore be calling for an assessment of its implementation and consequences to be carried out in the Member States very soon after the transposition deadline. Work is already underway at European level to put in place the tools needed for appropriate monitoring of the recommendation and the directive. This is not an easy task, as we know. It involves measuring how close we are to achieving the objective of 80% collective bargaining coverage. It is technically complex.

A collective agreement is not generally an "administrative" document. It is the result of intense and sometimes difficult negotiations, in a historical and institutional context that varies profoundly from one country to another. Moreover, social dialogue is not limited to the conclusion of collective agreements. It is a living, multifaceted process. As a result, the ideal indicator to reflect its quality is not immediately available.

The committees of the Epsco, Emco and SPC councils have therefore been tasked with developing the necessary indicators, in collaboration with the Commission and the social partners. The Belgian Presidency will support them in this difficult task until 2024. But monitoring the recommendation cannot be purely quantitative.

For several years now, social dialogue has been monitored as part of the European Semester, and this monitoring must be continued and stepped up! It allows the national social partners to indicate, in a European context, where things are not working well at home. Peer pressure can then play a positive role, even if it is true that progress is sometimes slow. For this to happen, the Commission and the Member States have to play the game, and call a spade a spade! They must be able to distinguish between sometimes difficult but serious consultations and deliberations, and procedures that are merely cosmetic.

It is therefore important that, as policy-makers in the fields of employment and social policy, we continue to invest in the European Semester. For it remains a central instrument for ensuring that economic and social policies within the Union are not only compatible, but also mutually reinforcing.

This is why, together with Spain, we have equipped the Semester with a mechanism to detect, and therefore better prevent, the development of social inequalities. It's clear to us that the risks of social divergence must be dealt with as quickly and appropriately as macroeconomic risks-. The *Social Convergence Framework*, which will be implemented from this year as part of the Semester procedure, will directly serve this objective.

Social dialogue will therefore be at the heart of the Belgian Presidency's priorities.

This will be particularly the case at the La Hulpe social summit I mentioned, where the social partners will play a crucial role... But it will also be the case at the Val Duchesse summit, which we will be organising with Mrs Von der Leyen, President of the Commission. We intend to go even further than these major one-off events.

With Spain, we are working on an initiative to revitalise the tripartite social summits. And we want to do this in close collaboration with the social partners, to whom we are asking to put forward concrete proposals. I know, for example, that better use of public procurement to promote social dialogue and strengthen social rights is a theme close to your heart. This is indeed a lever for strengthening the greening of our economy, but also for better ensuring respect for social rights. The quest for the lowest prices must not be the only criterion taken into account by the public authorities. They must not only oblige direct service providers to respect social rights, but also ensure that this obligation is respected downstream, by the entire chain. This was also a major concern when the directive on adequate minimum wages was drawn up.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The next few months will therefore be crucial in defining an ambitious social agenda for the coming years. Convinced of the importance of this objective for all our peoples, I can tell you that the Belgian Presidency will fully assume its responsibility in this area. But of course we cannot achieve it alone.

You know the obstacles we will have to overcome and the efforts we will have to make to rise to the challenge.

That's why we're counting enormously on your effective and determined support.

First of all, I'd like to thank you all.