

Dear Marc,

I was invited by the European Commission – DG Employment & Social Affairs to the meeting of the "Sub-group of national experts on financial participation" on September 28.

The meeting was a disaster and this seems highly instructive about the situation in the European Commission regarding employee ownership.

Let's first remind what is this "sub-group". Remind that the Lisbon Summit (years ago) asked the European Commission to make a Communication and an Action Plan. In 2002, they made a Communication. Thereafter, they committed a "High Level Group of Experts" to write a report on trans-national obstacles: this was done in 2003, the group being chaired by Jean-Baptiste de Foucauld.

The group of experts pointed that legal and fiscal barriers are the first obstacles. They made the suggestion that the Commission should set up a permanent group of national experts which should meet twice a year.

There was a long discussion within the Commission about which Directorate General should put this suggestion in force. Finally, DG Employment & Social Affairs kept the matter. Thereafter, they had a long discussion with their correspondents in the member states, which are the Directors General for Industrial Relations (within the ministries of employment and social affairs). These DG's discussed the matter and they were very reluctant: they were not very interested in the matter; why a new group? what to do? why all member states? Finally, they decided that the "sub-group of experts" would be created, but it couldn't discuss anything else than working conditions questions related to employee ownership; it would be forbidden to the sub-group to discuss legal or fiscal matters.

The sub-group had a first meeting in 2004. For most participants, this first meeting was very disappointing: no plan from the Commission, no project for the future, a bad meeting.

Since that time, the sub-group didn't meet again. The Commission promised a report of the first meeting but such report was never done.

Now the second meeting. In September 2006 they decided to invite the sub-group to a second meeting.

On 27 countries, only 17 countries attended. On the 17 participants, only 6 were present to the first meeting in 2004. Two other permanent representatives were invited: one for UNICE (European employers organisation) – he didn't attend; the other for ETUC (trade unions): he well attended.

The Head of Unit Jean-François Lebrun introduced the meeting, defining the sub-group's commitment as to be a forum for exchanges of information about what happens in countries. He reminded that the only point which could be discussed are working conditions questions related to financial participation (no fiscal, no legal questions, even being the first obstacles – as shown by de Foucauld's report).

After this introduction, we had a round table, each country describing its situation.

- Belgian representative said that she is not an expert in the matter and nothing changed in Belgium since first meeting in 2004.
- Danish expert said that she is not an expert in the matter and that nothing changed since they have a new legislation in 2004.
- German expert knows something about the matter; she said that political parties are organising working groups; a new legislation could be awaited in one-two years.
- Latvian expert said that she is not an expert in the matter and that Latvia has no legislation and no interest for the matter.
- French expert said that she is not an expert in the matter and she just knows that France is going to vote a new legislation this year.
- Irish expert was a real expert and he described the progress in Ireland.
- Spanish expert said that there is not real interest in Spain. When I told him about employee owned companies (sociedades laborales), he replied that this is not financial participation, because workers are their own employer in this case.
- Romanian expert declared that he was completely ignorant about the matter and that interest in Romania is low.
- Austrian expert was a real expert, she said the interest is growing in Austria and she told about the Austrian Report which we published some weeks ago. (Unfortunately, I forgot to take this opportunity to tell that the Commission refused to grant this report and the Austrian WKO made it with its own resources.)

- Dutch expert told that there is no policy in the Netherlands, it is just for social partners.
- Maltese expert said she is not an expert in the matter and there is no interest and no legislation in Malta.
- Lithuanian expert said she is not an expert in the matter and there is no interest and no legislation in Lithuania.
- British expert said she is not an expert in the matter but UK is doing well regarding financial participation.
- Swedish expert said she is not an expert in the matter and there is no policy and no legislation in Sweden.
- Finnish expert said he is not an expert in the matter but there is well some progress in Finland.
- Portuguese expert said she is not an expert in the matter and there is no interest and no legislation in Portugal.
- Bulgarian expert said she is not an expert in the matter and there is no interest and no legislation in Bulgaria.

After this first roundtable, we had three presentations about projects granted by the Commission. Marc Mathieu (Belgium) told about a "European Programme for Employee Ownership Learning and Education". Jean-François Content (France) told about a "Model Plan for Financial Participation" and Jens Lowitzsch about "Pepper III Report".

Following the presentations, a second roundtable was planned about "future work programme of the sub-group of experts". Jean-François Lebrun invited all participants to make suggestions. Nobody answered. Dutch expert shyly asked about Commission's projects.

Jean-François Lebrun replied that the Commission has no project for the future. Nothing planned for 2007 or even 2008.

Somebody expressed her surprise that Lisbon strategy was even not mentioned during the whole day.

Jean-François Lebrun concluded the meeting on 3.45 p.m. in place of 5 p.m., because there was nothing to say. He decided that meeting twice a year would not be useful in the future, because nothing changes and nothing to say – so once every two years should be enough.