

Joint Labour-management Declaration on Apprenticeship

In November 1998, in the framework of the Council of Luxembourg guidelines, the social partners from the European sugar industry had issued a joint labour-management recommendation, welcomed by Mr Padraig Flynn, at that time Commissioner responsible for social affairs and employment. The partners recommended in particular that companies in the sugar industry should:

- pursue their efforts to support apprenticeships – or any other training process for young people – in terms of numbers and the quality of the training;
- endeavour, whenever possible socially and economically, to offer more training courses and apprenticeships to young people in order to develop their work skills.

A survey carried out in October 2000 shows that the commitments have been widely respected.

At European level and in the framework of the Leonardo da Vinci Programme, the social partners have completed the elaboration of a particularly effective health and safety training tool which, on account of its quality, was selected as a contribution to the European Summit held in Lisbon in March 2000. This training tool, called the “kit Leonardo”, is today available in eleven languages in all European sugar factories and has gradually been integrated into numerous two-year training programmes at large European sugar companies.

At national level it appears that, as regards the sugar industry and to the extent compatible with their financial possibilities and the human resources needs:

- most companies genuinely want to continue to maintain and, if possible, develop training courses and apprenticeships schemes for young people in order to improve their training to facilitate their entry into working life ;
- several companies make it a point of honour to offer high-quality vocational training, which can lead, depending on their possibilities, to a certain number of fixed-term contracts or contracts of indeterminate duration being offered at the end of the training;
- in any event, when their financial resources or needs in terms of human resources do not allow companies to recruit direct, they make an effort to provide training which greatly facilitates the absorption of young people into employment in other sectors.

There are, however, limits to the measures implemented by companies to improve the work skills of young people and help their absorption into employment.

- Certain companies have observed that, if they had to employ more young people, they would be obliged to propose early retirement to older workers. It is therefore necessary to determine an appropriate balance as regards the age pyramid.
- In the context of a global easing of trade restrictions, the European sugar industry is currently confronted with serious economic problems which inevitably lead to the closing of plants. The commitments entered into with regard to the World Trade Organisation undermine the sustainability of the Community sugar system. By way of example, each quota reduction of 100 000 tons of sugar in order to meet the WTO constraints represents on factory closure.
- It is difficult to reconcile the simultaneous opening of frontiers and an exemption from customs duties – for example, in favour of the Least Developed Countries or Western Balkan States, even if the underlying intention is positive – with the existence of a regulated market structure. Under the WTO constraints any importation of sugar into the Community market results in an equivalent reduction of quotas to maintain the supply balance required by the Common Organization of Market.

For these different reasons, the European social partners consider that it is important to draw the attention of the European decision-makers to the serious need to find the right balance between, on the one hand, the desire to promote the principle of full employment leading to a drastic reduction in unemployment among young people in the European Union and - on the other hand - the determination to help the poorest countries in the world or developing countries, even if we do not dispute the humanitarian spirit behind such moves.

It is important to implement all appropriate measures in order to ensure that the easing of trade restrictions and the opening of frontiers do not threaten the economic activity, and therefore employment, of a whole sector of European industry.

It should be borne in mind that the European sugar industry employs directly 45,000 people, and contributes to providing employment for 325,000 beet planters and some 100,000 people in the subcontracting sectors.

The social partners in the sugar industry call upon the political leaders to take all steps to ensure that jobs are not lost, especially as new jobs cannot be created.