

The Social Agents and the Advance of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership

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In European and southern Mediterranean public opinion, the Barcelona Process and the successive Association agreements have constituted a state matter. In the last eight years, the civil societies of the opposite shores have only acquired a low level of knowledge and awareness with respect to the Euro-Mediterranean process, as a result of which they have seen mainly the negative consequences. The Process has, however been the focus of special attention from both business people and trade unions. Three recent facts can be seen to illustrate this.

On 28th February 2002 in Istanbul, the Union of Mediterranean Confederations of Enterprises (UMCE) was created, which brings together the main employers' organisations of Europe, through the UNICE, and the Mediterranean partner countries. The Union was the result of several years of coordination through the UNIMED Programme with the objective of providing support for the preparation of those companies with a view to the commercial liberalisation of 2010. In September 2003 in Damascus, a discussion process within the Euro-Med Trade Union Forum (ETUF) was concluded, from which a common platform of the region's trade unions emerged in matters of social protection, social dialogue and the right to work. This agreed position should help the ETUF and its members in their demands on defence

of work and social protection, and the respect for the fundamental rules of the International Labour Organisation. On 2nd December 2003 in Tunis, a first trade union meeting was held of the western Mediterranean countries that participate in the 5+5 Dialogue. The trade unions defined a common position on the points to be discussed in the first Summit of Heads of State and Government, and called for urgent attention to be given to the employment needs in the region, as well as cooperative policies in matters of migration management. Moreover, they showed their concern for certain aspects of the new neighbourhood policy outlined by the European Commission, and called for an early resolution of the conflicts in the region in accordance with international law and the United Nations resolutions, pointing out that without this there would be no advance in regional integration, which is essential to the Partnership and the economic development.

These three events are the manifestation of a concern that was expressed by the social agents before the 1995 Barcelona summit was held on the challenges and predictable consequences of the new European policies with their southern periphery.

The association agreements between the European Union and the Mediterranean partner countries have involved the launching of important economic reforms or the development of those already in existence, in the case of the latter countries. Reforms which with a view to the 2010 commercial liberalisation mean legislative changes, budgetary modifications and industrial ratio-

nalizations with a direct impact on employment, systems of social protection and industrial relations.

Before the Barcelona Conference the social agents on the European Economic and Social Committee had already made a notable contribution with several reports on the European Mediterranean policy, stressing the economic and social challenges of the region. At a later date, on the occasion of the Euro-Mediterranean Trade Union Summit held in Seville on 6th and 7th November 1995, the trade unions from Europe and the south of the Mediterranean had declared their support of the initiative, pointing out the need to accompany economic development with social development, reforms with respect for the fundamental labour rules as defined by the ILO, and supporting regional integration. At that time they already noted that among the co-operation priorities should figure employment, the fight against poverty and exclusion, structural reforms with a social purpose, migration and the promotion of the fundamental human and social rights.

Over the course of the following eight years, trade unions have been the most active in the monitoring of European Mediterranean policy. In April 1999 in Stuttgart, some days before the Ministerial Summit, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), with the support of the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions (ICATU) and the Trade Union Confederation of Arab Maghreb Workers (USTMA), created the Euro-Med Trade Union Forum.¹ The ETUF

¹ *The Euro-Mediterranean partnership and its social dimension. Compendium of documents.* Euro-Med Trade Union Forum. Brussels/Madrid, 2003.

had two strategic objectives: to strengthen trade union cooperation and to contribute to the development of the association's social scope by adopting common positions before community institutions and national governments. At the time it had already criticised the lack of consultations with the economic and social agents concerning the design of the architecture and the advancements of the process. It also pointed out that one strategic objective of the trade union movement was the establishment of a true tripartite social dialogue at national and trans-national levels, and solicited the urgent creation of a Euro-Med social fund, similar to the fund that exists at a European level. In Marseilles in November 2000, the ETUF repeated its critique on the imbalance of the Barcelona Process, which was centred on the commercial liberalisation and the economic reforms, but which lacked palliative measures in matters of employment, the social dimension and the participation of social agents. It called again for the establishment of a mechanism of tripartite management: «The ETUF considers that the consultation of social interlocutors is a significant part of social dialogue as a means to co-ordinate the legitimate economic and social interests and as a contribution to the democratisation of national society. Social dialogue in a democratic environment contributes to stability, a factor essential for positive development. Bilateral agreements and the regulations of the MEDA funds must provide for financial support in order to develop industrial relations and promote social dialogue». In order to achieve its objectives, the ETUF has had firstly to limit its field of action and define common positions with respect to the Partnership. In the second place, it considered three fundamental issues on which it had to define its position: 1) systems of social protection, in some cases threatened by the reforms and in others insufficient; 2) social dialogue, unequally developed

in the MPC; and 3) fundamental labour rights, formally recognised as most of the ILO's recommendations had been accepted, but which had achieved low effectiveness. To this end, with a network of university and trade union experts, the ETUF established the state of the issue according to countries, produced comparative studies according to regions, and organised regional consultations, before defining the minimum social standards that the Forum and the national organisations must defend before the EU and the governments.

Although regional integration processes and globalisation have forced trade unions to develop mechanisms of international cooperation and agreed action (such as the experiences in Latin America, for example), the experience of the ETUF is exceptional and has no equivalent. It is a monitoring structure between the trade unions of countries that coincide on the establishment of a free trade zone within a cooperation mechanism between an integrated region, the EU, and its periphery, the MPC.

However, over the years, some of its weaknesses have also been revealed.

The European trade unions pay unequal attention to the south flank of the EU and to the consequences of the association in the countries of the Mediterranean area; so far the southern Europeans have been the most active in this experience. The southern and eastern Mediterranean trade unions do not have a coordination practice as their European partners do; the ETUC has no equivalent interlocutor in the south.

The ETUF, although it is integrated by all the most representative trade unions, does not reflect the pluralism that exists. Although on the European side all the members of the ETUC are natural members of the Forum, in the south only one trade union participated per country, which constitutes the full representation. Through these years the activities of the ETUF have had little external visibility, given that the cohesion and the advance in internal debates became a priority.

Finally, the Arab-Israeli conflict has meant an important hindrance. Since the beginning of the second Intifada, many Arab organisations have refused to participate in any joint activity with their Israeli counterpart Histadrut, until this distances itself definitively from the policies of the Government of Tel Aviv.

Despite this, the ETUF has taken important steps. Today it is the main structure of dialogue and trade union cooperation between the Europeans and their Mediterranean neighbours. Moreover, it is one of the few representative and consolidated Euro-Mediterranean civil networks, capable of defining common positions in several issues.

The following steps of the ETUF will have a dimension of greater political scope. On one hand, it must now approach the governments and institutions of the EU in the same way as the ETUC acts for European affairs. On the other hand, the ETUF must formulate a contribution of its own, from the labour world and civil society, to dialogue and peace in the Middle East. Finally, the ETUF must initiate into dialogue with the Euro-Mediterranean structure of employers' organisations (UMCE) that seeks to be the main interlocutor for the encouragement of trade and investments necessary for the development of the region. The role of social agents in the Partnership is conditioned by several factors, the most significant of which is that the Partnership is centred on its economic and commercial aspects in which employment is a marginal issue that in eight years has not had even a sectoral conference of ministers of the twenty-seven member countries. Moreover, although Europe has an important *acquis* of social consensus, and Brussels' policy of cooperation is inclined toward the rhetoric of good governance and the support to the strengthening of civil society, the social agents of the two sides of the Mediterranean continue on the margin of the Euro-Mediterranean Euro-Med Partnership.

SOCIAL AGENTS: REFERENCE DOCUMENTS

Documents on the social dimension of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (Euro-Med Trade Unions Forum):
<http://www.ccoo.es/international/foro.htm>

Declarations of the Euro-Mediterranean summits of the Economic and Social Councils and similar institutions:
<http://www.esc.eu.int>

UNIMED and UMCE:
<http://www.unimedbn.be>