

'The Fifteen make a start on a concerted employment policy' from Le Monde (23 November 1997)

Caption: On 23 November 1997, the French daily newspaper Le Monde comments on the decisions adopted in Luxembourg by the Fifteen following the extraordinary European Council on employment that took place on 20 and 21 November seeking to put in place a European employment policy.

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. Colombani, Jean-Marie. 23-24.11.1997, n° 16 430; 53e année. Paris: Le Monde. "Les Quinze amorcent une politique concertée de l'emploi", auteur:Lemaître, Philippe , p. 4.

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The Fifteen make a start on a concerted employment policy

The French authorities welcome the results of the Luxembourg summit, while Spain and Germany have more reservations.

At the Luxembourg summit on Friday 21 November, the Heads of State and Government of the fifteen Member States of the European Union adopted a number of joint guidelines for combating unemployment. One aim is to increase training and reinsertion opportunities for the young and long-term unemployed. The Luxembourg guidelines will be subject to regular joint evaluation, but no binding measures or penalties are envisaged. The document also refers to the need to achieve greater flexibility on the labour market, and confirms that each government remains master in its own house. Thus, despite differing approaches to employment policy, all the Member States were able to approve it.

Luxembourg (European Union)

from our correspondent

The Heads of State and Government of the Fifteen left Luxembourg on the evening of Friday 21 November, after their summit meeting on employment, with a feeling of mission accomplished. The French, at whose initiative the summit was held, were particularly pleased. In a climate of general scepticism, Lionel Jospin had secured a resolution on growth and employment, together with the promise to convene this extraordinary European Council, at the Amsterdam summit in June, in exchange for endorsement of the budgetary stability pact which the Germans were seeking. At a joint press conference with Mr Jospin, who was leaving straight away for the Socialist Party congress in Brest, Jacques Chirac said: 'We are pleased. Europe is gradually assuming the social dimension it had been accused of neglecting. We have taken another important step forward.'

The Heads of State and Government agreed on a method, a timetable and objectives, some of which are measurable. As proposed by the Brussels Commission, they adopted a series of 'guidelines' which each government will have to follow when drawing up national employment plans in the coming months.

A five-year deadline

The guidelines on vocational reinsertion and training for the young and long-term unemployed are the most specific. To firm up the commitment, Luxembourg Prime Minister Jean-Claude Juncker, who chaired the meeting, secured agreement on a five-year maximum deadline for achieving the declared aims, with the possibility of derogations.

The Spaniards, who had reservations about the whole operation and have the highest unemployment rate in the Union, stressed that the proposals would weigh heavily on the budget. It was also decided that the proportion of the unemployed offered training should be raised to at least 20 %, or 25 % if possible, which is the average in the three countries doing most in this respect. France will have a lot of catching up to do, since, according to Elysée spokesperson Catherine Colonna, 15 % of French unemployed are currently receiving training.

In finalising Council's conclusions, it was apparent that the Germans and Spaniards had most reservations about a concerted employment policy. Chancellor Kohl's advisers stalled throughout the day, stressing the need to keep the joint objectives realistic and preserve the autonomy of each party with regard to implementation — a worrying state of mind when we are about to embark on the next stage.

No penalties

'This is the start of a continuous operation,' Jacques Chirac and Lionel Jospin emphasised. First of all, as regards procedure: the plans of action in favour of employment, which should first give rise to a major

debate at national level, will be examined by the Fifteen in Cardiff in June. At the December meeting in Vienna, the Heads of State and Government will discuss implementation of the national plans and continue the operation by laying down new guidelines for 1999. What will happen if the performance of a given Member State is inadequate in terms of the commitments? Unlike the provisions concerning the budgetary stability pact, there will be no penalties. 'That is not what we are after,' Mr Jospin said. But Council will be able to put pressure on a defaulting country by adopting 'recommendations' and, once the Amsterdam Treaty has been ratified, to do so by a qualified majority.

Friday's agreement should give fresh impetus to the 'European social dialogue'. It stipulates that the social partners shall be constantly involved in monitoring implementation of the policy. On the day before each European Council, a 'troika' consisting of the President-in-Office of the Union, his predecessor and his successor, will meet employers and trade unions to take stock of the situation.

The success of Thursday's transnational demonstration testifies to renewed interest on the part of the trade unions. In a written statement to the Council, Mr Jospin suggested 'proposing to the social partners topics on which there is felt to be a need for dialogue. I have in mind, in particular, the harmonisation of social legislation. The recent road-transport conflict in France (...) shows, if proof were needed, the urgent necessity for progress at European level. The modernisation and organisation of working conditions, including the reduction of working hours, should also be a major topic in a more dynamic and constructive social dialogue.'

For the future, Mr Jospin proposed that consideration be given to opening up other avenues by the same method (objectives set at European level, national plans based on those objectives, joint verification): creation of jobs linked to new technologies, increasing the proportion of workers undergoing permanent training, and investment in research. The prime minister also called for 'a more concerted approach to industrial restructuring, involving in particular consultation with the social partners at the appropriate level, so as to counter the economic and social impact more effectively.'

Philippe Lemaître