

## **The 3<sup>rd</sup> European Co-operative Convention – 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> June 2007 Prague**

### **Co-operatives: what role in the social dialogue?**

#### **Speech – Pauline Green, Co President, Co-operatives Europe**

Colleagues and Friends,

This is an important meeting and an important topic.

Those of you familiar with the European Social Dialogue will know that it is a unique and indispensable component of the European social model. It is about negotiations, joint initiatives, consultations and discussions between the social partner organisations representing the two sides of industry – management and labour.

The Social Dialogue ensures that the social partners must be involved in all new social policy initiatives taken by the Commission. The Co-operative model of business is not recognised as a social partner, and what voice we do have in the process is through three of our sectoral organisations, insurance, agriculture and banks that take part in their appropriate sectoral social dialogue.

At the highest level of the social dialogue, there are in fact only three general inter-sectoral organisations of particular importance, Business Europe, formerly UNICE, the voice of the private sector businesses, CEEP, the public sector employers and the ETUC, the European trade unions.

Colleagues, I would ask you to remember that within the 27 countries of the European Union, co-operative employers represent 120 million members, owning 231,000 enterprises and employing 4.6 million people.

We represent a different model of business management and ownership – one based on a set of values and principles, that have a social agenda, that are about social cohesion and employment, and that are actually in tune with many of the key social and entrepreneurial objectives of the European Union, and its Lisbon strategy in particular. Our model of business is adept at finding solutions to needs unmet by the public or ‘private for profit’ enterprises, creating sustainable employment, and helping to develop regions with economic difficulties. All on the basis of

simultaneously meeting business and social objectives in a mutually reinforcing way.

Isn't this a model of business management and ownership that ought to be represented in the social dialogue. Shouldn't those actively using this model of business be present in their own right as a social partner able to influence EU social policy, both to ensure that our business needs are not neglected, and also that our unique and innovative mix of business and social policies should be able to influence the social direction in Europe.

So the answer to the question posed in the title of this session Co-operatives: what role in the social dialogue? The answer currently is – NONE.

That is why Cooperatives Europe proposed the Social Partners Programme project to the Commission, and we believe that the interim report that you have received today, whilst still incomplete, is already demonstrating strong trends in favour of our inclusion as a social partner.

Yesterday in the Board meeting of Cooperatives Europe, we had the opportunity of an hour's meeting with Commissioner Spidla, the Commissioner for Employment, Equal Opportunities and Social Affairs. We were once again heartened to hear him talking, as we know him as a good friend of the co-operative movement. I had the chance to raise with him the importance of the role of the co-operative model of business, and recognition of our request to become a social partner and part of the cross sectoral Social Dialogue.

I was also able to tell him that, from the results laid out in the interim report of the Social Partners Programme, we believe that the main conditions for Cooperatives Europe to be recognised as a Social Partner are met. Those main conditions refer to the representative nature of an organisation, and I refer you once again to those figures about the size of our EU profile, and we do not believe that those figures are yet complete.

The Commissioner who does take a keen interest in things co-operative knows about our Social Partners Project which is, of course, funded by his Directorate General, and made clear that he looks forward to receiving the final report from us with the completed work at the end of this year and, if the results are as we predict, we can be sure of his support.

Ray Collins who works for Cooperatives Europe on issues of image and visibility, will later outline to you the interim trends and outcomes of our

survey with members, and I will not steal his thunder by giving you the key statistics now. But I can tell you that they are already impressive in making the case that we have an overriding representation amongst those 231,000 enterprises with their 4.6 million staff.

However, the results are not yet complete. 25 countries were covered by the national questionnaires. Out of these only 11 are fully complete with 6 almost complete. 5 questionnaires still require considerable work and 3 organisations have not replied at all until now. Colleagues, can I ask you to check with Rainer during today or tomorrow and if your organisation is one of those that has not yet responded, or is a little slow in completing the work, please help us by trying to push the process along when you return home. Because one thing is for sure without those results our case will be the weaker. But with them we could be within spitting distance of being part of the social dialogue. Not only will that be a significant result in terms of our ability to influence decisions, and create new and powerful networks, but it will also add very substantially to our visibility and presence in the corridors of power in Brussels. It will make it impossible for Commission officials ever to repeat those infamous words that we heard at the 2<sup>nd</sup> European Convention in Brussels two years ago – that co-operatives are invisible in the European Commission!

Ends.