

Social policy and the fight against unemployment

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The fight against unemployment

The Treaty of Amsterdam introduced significant innovations in the area of social policy, with a new title on employment, changes to provisions on social policy so as to incorporate the substance of the social policy agreement annexed to the Treaty of Maastricht, and new provisions for non-discrimination and gender equality. These developments were encouraged by the rise in unemployment and a growing awareness among national governments of the Europe-wide employment crisis, and also by a change in the attitude of the British Government, which had long been opposed to greater social integration, following Tony Blair's election as Prime Minister.

With the Treaty of Amsterdam, the promotion of employment became an objective for the Community, and the Member States and the Community were given the task of developing a coordinated employment strategy, which aimed to provide a skilled labour force and could be adapted to meet the changing needs of the labour market. The Council was to draw up guidelines for employment for each country and analyse employment policy in each of the Member States. It was decided that these provisions would be applied immediately so that employment policies could be coordinated as from 1998, following the conclusions of the Extraordinary European Council Meeting on Employment held in Luxembourg on 20 and 21 November 1997.

The incorporation of the social policy agreement in the Treaty of Amsterdam made it possible to simplify the legislative procedure in this area. Some aspects of social policy are decided on by the Council, acting by qualified majority in codecision with Parliament (workers' health and safety, working conditions, the integration of persons excluded from the labour market, the information and consultation of workers, equality between men and women, and the combating of social exclusion). In other fields, the Council applies the unanimity rule (social security and social protection of workers, protection of workers when their employment contract is terminated, representation and collective defence of the interests of workers and employers, conditions of employment for third-country nationals, and financial contributions for the promotion of employment and job creation), while some fields are excluded from Community competence (pay, the right of association, the right to strike and the right to impose lock-outs). Social dialogue is recognised at Community level and can lead to the conclusion of agreements.

The final major change introduced by the Treaty of Amsterdam regarding social policy is in the area of non-discrimination. The Treaty creates a legal basis to combat any discrimination based on sex, race, ethnic origin, religion or beliefs, disability, age or sexual orientation. It also strengthens the basis for equal treatment for male and female staff. Finally, it enables the Member States to adopt measures providing for specific advantages to make it easier for the under-represented sex to pursue a vocational activity or to prevent or compensate for disadvantages in professional careers.