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Reply to the Sixth Report of the International Labour Organisation

Report¹

Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee

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Draft Resolution

The Assembly has, with great interest, taken note of the Sixth Report, submitted to it by the International Labour Organisation, and it wishes to thank I. L. O. for this survey of activities of particular interest to Europe carried out by that Organisation.

The Assembly would take this opportunity to make the following remarks:

1. Manpower problems and migration

The attention of the Committee on Social Questions of the Assembly has been drawn to the fact that the Buildings, Civil Engineering and Public Works Committee of I. L. O., at its last session (May 1956), invited the Governing Body to include in the agenda of the next session of that Committee the question of international labour mobility in the construction industry.

L'Assemblée estime que cette étude présentera une grande utilité et qu'il convient d'accorder une attention particulière à la situation en Europe.

2. Social security of migrant workers

The Assembly adopted as long ago as August 1950 a Recommendation (29) calling for the conclusion of a general convention to protect the social security rights of migrant workers. It takes a great interest in the efforts of I. L. O. and of the High Authority of the European Coal and Steel Community in this field and hopes that the convention, which is almost completed, will be open for accession by the other Members of the Council of Europe.

3. Social aspects of European economic co-operation

The highly interesting report on this matter prepared by the group of experts set up by the Governing Body in pursuance of a recommendation by the first European Regional Conference of I. L. O., has been brought to the attention of the Committee on Social Questions and the Committee on Economic Questions of the Assembly.

The Assembly notes with satisfaction the mention made in this report of various projects of the Council of Europe in the field of European economic co-operation, such as the Low Tariff Club, the Strasbourg Plan and the European Investment Bank.

With regard to the special position of Southern Europe, the Assembly wishes to draw the attention of I. L. O. to its Recommendations 91 (26th October 1955) and 95 (20th April 1956), the trend of which is in harmony with the conclusions of the group of experts. Thus, Recommendation 95 calls for the creation of a European Development Fund to provide capital in the form of grants and/or loans for development projects in Greece, Italy and Turkey.

The Assembly has noted the conclusion of the group of experts that a harmonisation of social conditions and policies, including social charges, is not a pre-condition for a closer economic co-operation or for the functioning of a possible common market.

The group of experts has, further, in accordance with its mandate, raised the question whether, if a freer international market were established, it might be necessary for the countries of Europe to shape and carry out their social policies with a greater degree of international consultation and co-ordination than at present.

The experts appear to have dealt with this question mainly from an economic point of view. From this angle their conclusions may be fully valid: if appropriate measures are taken to encourage the development of industry in the lower-income countries, the standard of living of workers in such countries would tend to improve more rapidly than in countries where the income is higher. The competition on a common market would not prevent a rise of the standard of living in any country. There is no reason why countries where economic and social conditions are different should follow identical policies regarding, e.g. the length of the working week or the financing of social security. It would perhaps be worth studying the possibility of harmonising to a certain extent social policy at the international level if the lack of such harmonisation were likely to lead to serious distortions in the structure of trade. From this point of view it would be useful to examine the difficulties encountered by certain States in ratifying selected international labour conventions, and particularly the Convention on equal pay for equal work.

The Assembly does not contest the validity of these conclusions from an economic point of view. In accordance with the political role which the Assembly, and the Council of Europe as a whole, is called upon to play, the Assembly wishes, however, to stress that the considerations of the group of experts could usefully be supplemented by other considerations of a long-term social political nature. It is true that the group of experts has, in its report, briefly touched upon considerations of a social order which would justify a close international collaboration in the social field, even apart from economic reasons. From the point of view of the Assembly such social considerations should have a broader place.

It has, on several occasions, in accordance with the principles of Article I of the Statute of the Council of Europe, called for a certain harmonisation of social legislation and practice in the Member States. The aim should, of course, not be uniformity, which would be neither possible nor desirable. But even allowing for national differences which may be due both to different stages of economic development and to national traditions and preferences, the Assembly believes that the Member States could and should agree on certain main principles of social policy and certain minimum standards of social benefits and advantages. The Committee of Ministers has also accepted the principle of a harmonisation of national social activities.

While it is true, as stated by the group of experts, that a freer European market would not hamper the further improvement in workers' living standards as productivity is increased, it is not certain that the increased wealth flowing from closer economic cooperation would automatically benefit the workers to an equitable extent. The Assembly believes that measures in the economic field should be supplemented by an active social policy.

That is why the Assembly has taken such a great interest in the framing of a European Social Charter and a European Code of Social Security.

The need, recognised by the group of experts, for certain social measures to counteract special difficulties which may arise out of the liberalisation of international trade, would be met by the application of the European Social Charter as conceived by the Assembly.

The proposal of the group of experts to examine the reasons why certain international labour conventions have not been ratified by a large number of European Governments, and the proposal to establish higher European standards in certain fields can only be welcomed by the Assembly, since these ideas are in complete harmony with its own views as expressed on several occasions.