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Building the future of work together

Stronger together: delivering social innovation through social dialogue

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Social Dialogue at cross-industry and sectoral level is a key component of the European social market economy and industrial relations system. For the temporary agency work sector, sectoral social dialogue at national and European level is a key instrument to settle working conditions and pay and also to foster social innovation. In the private employment services industry social innovation is understood as the creation of new solutions for working, learning and providing social protection to the benefit of workers, employers and society at large.

At EU level, the World Employment Confederation-Europe and UNI-Europa have been recognised as European sectoral social partners since 2001. In recent years sectoral social dialogue has focused on three main dimensions: firstly, to contribute to EU debates in the fields of labour law, working conditions for agency workers and employment policies; secondly, to share national experiences of social dialogue in order to foster mutual learning and the exchange of good practice; and thirdly, to conduct joint research on topics of common interest to both sectoral social partners.

For example, in 2017-2018 WEC-Europe and UNI-Europa conducted a joint project on “Online talent platforms, labour market intermediaries and the changing world of work”, looking at the characteristics and size of the online talent platform economy, the regulatory environment and its contribution to the labour market. The temporary agency work sector was used as a comparator in this analysis. Based on the conclusions of the project, social partners issued Joint Recommendations calling for a level-playing field and the same treatment for adequately similar services, the application and enforcement of European regulation and the recognition of the benefits of diverse forms of work for well-functioning labour markets. The recommendations also underlined the importance of fostering social innovation and of developing transferable and portable rights in accordance with national practices.

The concept of social innovation is now being taken further in the new World Employment Confederation-Europe and UNI-Europa joint project for the 2019-2020 period. Conducted in cooperation with the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) and the Catholic University of

Leuven, the project focuses on collecting, assessing and discussing practices of social innovation in the temporary agency work industry across Europe. Three dimensions will be investigated: access to training, working conditions for agency workers and social innovation in the area of social protection.

At national level, a lot is happening in our sector thanks to social dialogue. Bipartite training funds, governed jointly by employers and trade unions and financed by the agency work industry, have been set up in several countries. The bipartite training funds create plenty of new solutions for learning, e.g. the “Testyourselfie” project implemented by the training fund in Belgium where an app has been developed to help young people test and develop their soft skills - which are now increasingly sought after by employers.

In France, the social fund FAS-TT also drives social innovation in the areas of social protection and working conditions. It offers a broad range of services to 83,000 agency workers each year, helping them access housing, health insurance, mobility solutions and childcare facilities and making their lives easier.

The focus on collecting concrete case studies and examples makes this current joint project special and particularly valuable for setting the agenda of the next European Commission. As the project will investigate the transferability and saleability of the national examples identified, it can form a basis for mutual learning and the fostering of social innovation across Europe.

However, social dialogue is not just about advancing working conditions and protection for temporary agency workers. It also plays a role in ensuring appropriate conditions for temporary work agencies to operate and contribute to job creation. Unfortunately, we are concerned with the trend observed in Europe over the past years, with new conditions and restrictions being introduced; often echoing the demands of trade unions. Recent reforms in Germany, Norway and Italy are examples of this worrying development. An open, transparent and constructive sectoral social dialogue at national level can be an important instrument in reaching and maintaining appropriate regulation for the agency work industry. It is important to find the balance right if we aim to “Making Europe the best place to work!” as we call for in our World Employment Confederation-Europe Vision Paper. Unjustified and disproportionate restrictions on the agency work sector should be avoided and lifted. When acting jointly, both at European and national level, sectoral social partners can help to strengthen the voice of the sector towards governments and work to build future-proof labour markets.

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