

“We need to work with the unions for the future of retail and wholesale”

Speaking today at the annual UNI Europa Commerce sector Conference in Bucharest, EuroCommerce Director-General Christian Verschueren underlined the importance of social partners working together to ensure that the 29 million Europeans working in retail and wholesale are equipped to have sustainable and rewarding jobs in this rapidly-changing commercial environment.

UNI Europa and EuroCommerce are the only European Social Partners for the retail and wholesale sector, and EuroCommerce is pleased with the positive collaboration with UNI Europa since the creation of the European Social Dialogue Committee for Commerce in 1998. Verschueren commented on the positive and fruitful relationship with UNI Europa, dating back as far as 1983, and the work done together over the years on a range of issues of importance to employers and employees in our sector.

Verschueren highlighted the seismic changes happening in retail and wholesale and specifically called on the unions to help prepare the employees for the future:

“The sector faces major challenges, ranging from digitalisation of the economy to rapidly changing consumer demands and lifestyles, along with global sustainability and health imperatives. Ours is a sector directly dependent on consumers. I am confident that it can and will adapt rapidly to meet their needs and aspirations. And indeed companies will only survive if they do. As social partners, both of us agree that tailored working conditions, continuous learning, innovative in-company training are vital for upskilling employees so that they can handle new technologies and ways of working. We have been working together to press for EU support under ESF+ to expand our existing efforts to meet these challenges. But most solutions need to happen at national and local level. These are all areas we need employers and unions working together on, but with the future in mind”.

Retail and wholesale is the largest private sector employer in each of the EU’s 28 Member States, and thus in the EU as a whole. We are proud of our record of investing in training, and seeing people starting on the shop floor gaining the skills to move into management. But retail of the future will be marked by adoption of data-driven technologies such as AI and blockchain. The sector will need people able to interact with new technologies, and to adapt along with rapid and constant changes in consumer expectations. We are moving with this evolution. For example, our German members and their social partners have evolved their dual learning education (the most successful dual learning programme in Germany), and developed a completely new digital job profile: the ‘e-commerce merchant’. This unprecedented example of innovative vocational education and training in our sector is preparing young people for the jobs of the future in retail. Technology is very important in this mix, but equally essential to the future of bricks-and-mortar retail will be making the most of the peoples’ expertise and social skills to offer top-quality customers advice and service.

Verschueren concluded: *“Our sector can no longer be defined by bricks and mortar or pure online players – these distinctions are irrelevant where consumers can already choose any blend of the two. What will determine the future of physical stores will be investment in innovative new services - and in the soft skills and expertise of people working there - to make going to the shops an even more useful and enjoyable experience.”*

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