

Autonomous and voluntary social partnership the right template for fair social conditions

Commenting on the launch today of the Commission Action Plan for the European Pillar of Social Rights, EuroCommerce Director-General Christian Verschueren said:

“Retail and wholesale are a people business, serving people. We provide stable and fulfilling jobs for 29 million Europeans; that is 1 in 7 jobs. We value immensely the work of all our colleagues who have worked during the COVID pandemic serving our customers, keeping the shelves stocked with the daily essentials consumers need, and adapting to a massive shift to online sales. Yet, we do not take that dedication for granted. We reward people and ensure that they can work safely. In most countries, the employment conditions in our sector are subject to collective agreements, and this has worked well. Active social partnership is a tried formula for managing and building consensus around changes in business and in the jobs people do. We therefore naturally support Commission efforts to promote social dialogue and socio-economic convergence. But this should go with the grain of what is already in place nationally and be within the boundaries of the EU treaties.”

And while food retailers have been working hard to keep the food supply chain running smoothly, companies and employees in the non-grocery sector have faced restrictions, along with business uncertainty and job insecurity, for almost a year. We are seeking help in EU and national recovery plans to help investment in resilience for all our sector, and in equipping our companies and employees to play a key role in the digital and sustainability transition.

National law and practice have made collective bargaining the norm in retail and wholesale, with collective agreements providing appropriate levels of protection for employees. Some 88% of staff in our sector are on permanent contracts and are ensured good levels of social protection. Women account for 62% of the workforce in retail and the sector gives millions of young people their first step-up into employment. As a sector, we are committed to giving all involved in retail and wholesale as good working conditions as possible. Experience has shown that autonomous collective bargaining, particularly through constructive engagement with our social partners at the level closest to the workplace, works better in agreeing positive change rather than top-down legislation.

It is thus not just a matter of principle, but also of practical common sense, that EU social legislation, such as the draft Directives on minimum wages and pay transparency, are adjusted to fully reflect the autonomy of social partners at national, sectoral and company level. The best way of meeting the current challenges is through stronger EU investment in promoting autonomous and voluntary social dialogue throughout Europe. This was why, together with our social partner UNI Europa and other leading players in the service sector, we recently called upon the Commission for capacity-building in this area and not pursue further proposed cuts to EU sectoral social dialogue.

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EuroCommerce is the principal European organisation representing the retail and wholesale sector. It embraces national associations in 31 countries and 5.4 million companies, both leading global players such as Carrefour, Ikea, Metro and Tesco, and many small businesses. Retail and wholesale provide a link between producers and 500 million European consumers over a billion times a day. It generates 1 in 7 jobs, providing a varied career for 29 million Europeans, many of them young people. It also supports millions of further jobs throughout the supply chain, from small local suppliers to international businesses. EuroCommerce is the recognised European social partner for the retail and wholesale sector.