

Draft speech John Monks,
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30 Jahre Mitbestimmungsgesetz 1976 – Mehr Demokratie in der Wirtschaft
Berlin, August 30, 2006, Hans-Böckler-Stiftung

Chancellor,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear friends and colleagues,

“Mitbestimmung”: a word that, translated into other languages, is producing misunderstandings and misinterpretations. The most evident example is the long-lasting tradition of the French to translate “Mitbestimmung” into “co-gestion”. If you transfer that term into English, “Mitbestimmung” becomes co-management.

And the next step then is to denounce the German unions to mix up social responsibility with own management ambitions. This misinterpretation was one of the reasons for remarkable battles in the European trade union movement in the fifties and sixties when unions, mainly from Southern Europe and from France, accused German unions of collaboration with capitalism.

But of course, that should be added, that during a time, many German unionists had been convinced that “Mitbestimmung” would be a concept to be transplanted 1:1 to other national situations, a model for the whole of Europe.

It happened even that the then president of the DGB, Heinz Oskar Vetter, was very badly received by the delegates of the CFDT congress in Brest in 1979 – CFDT at that time was still promoting workers self-management – because DGB was under suspicion to try to exercise hegemony over the ETUC. At the end Vetter got big applause because he clearly denied those ambitions.

Since then, those controversies are over. Last not least because of the growing cooperation and increasing integration of the European trade union movement that produced among other a high degree of mutual information and knowledge.

Having said this, you may understand that I largely prefer to stick to the term “Mitbestimmung”, not only to avoid confusion but also because I strongly believe that “Mitbestimmung” is a very specific approach. In a way it is a social and political résumé of Germany’s history in the last century.

What has been achieved is a remarkable piece of economic democracy and participation. It has been achieved not at all without confrontations and struggle because participation and economic democracy is not exactly what classical capitalism is about. But it is a corner stone of democracy and social market economy.

Some pretend that “Mitbestimmung” is now largely archaic and should be watered down or just taken away. I pretend that the contrary is true: not only because

“Mitbestimmung” must be considered as a de facto constitutional element of Germany’s democracy after the Second World War but also because in the light of the debate about Europe’s future “Mitbestimmung” is a major reference of the European social model.

Social market economy – a concept that is referred to in the draft for the constitutional treaty – cannot exist without participation, social democracy, social partnership and social dialogue. To fight for this is one of the reasons why the European Trade Union Confederation exists. It is one of our “raisons d’etre”. And it will be so in the future. These are key elements of our European future and without it, Europe’s citizens will not feel at home in the European Union. These are lessons to be taken from the referenda in France and in the Netherlands.

To preserve the “Mitbestimmung” as the most structured and most historical piece of participation in Europe is clearly in the interest of the European trade union movement. A lost battle in Germany is a lost battle for all of us.

A close look at the social map in Europe demonstrates that participation of workers and their trade unions in the economic life on a company level but even on the institutional state level is an important part of Europe’s social reality. It is the role of the ETUC to bring together diversities and different social cultures in order to develop a comprehensive and coherent approach about social democracy and participation. Your specific experience is an important added value to that exercise.

What we need and what the ETUC has to approach is the Europeanization of a coherent concept of a participative democracy in the social and economic context. Your experience is in that respect a highly important reference and I congratulate the DGB for its proposal to open the boards of administration in German companies for non-German European members. This is far more than symbolic.

In May 2005, the EU commission has presented an action plan for the modernization of the company law. We do not reject the objectives of that initiative, namely to improve the framework for the European legislation in that respect. This process, projected for a period of ten years, cannot be put in place without consultation and participation of the trade unions. But the coordinating commissioner, Frits Bolkestein – him again – is obviously not of that conviction. We will do our best to make him change. We have some practical experiences in that respect to offer.

Dear friends and colleagues, allow me at the end of my greetings to offer a bunch of flowers – at least symbolically – to the Hans-Boeckler-Foundation, an institution that is a legitimate child – boy or girl, I don’t know – of “Mitbestimmung”, largely financially supported by those who do represent workers and trade unions in thousands of boards of administration. This is unique in the world. I congratulate the Foundation for its large scale of remarkable and outstanding activities that are important for you and all of us. I hope that you will continue to strengthen the European aspects of your operation, to provide research and expertise not only for domestic use but cross border. We all should be aware that the European Social Model can only evolve if we are forgetting about borders and do what we have to do: to strengthen the trade union cooperation and integration.