

European Convention 23-24 May 2002
Intervention by Emilio Gabaglio

I should like to thank you, Mr Chairman, for giving me the floor in my capacity as observer from the European Trade Union Confederation which – may I perhaps be permitted to remind you? – is the unitary organisation representing the whole of the trade union movement of the EU member states and all the applicant countries.

In relation to the distribution of powers, I should like to say that, in our opinion, what is needed by the current system, rather than any radical change, is greater transparency and efficiency. Whatever happens, it must remain flexible and dynamic, allowing for further developments in the future.

Many of the results achieved could not have been achieved if the system had not already possessed these characteristics.

A few new features do, however, need to be introduced.

The first relates to economic policy. It is in our view obvious that, if the completed internal market is to be placed genuinely in the service of sustainable development and full employment, the EU has to be given greater powers to coordinate economic and fiscal policy, including taxation matters.

The current situation actually prevents us from fully enjoying the development potential which, insofar as we act together, is available to us.

The second relates to the European Union's powers in the social and employment policy field. Contrary to opinions held in certain quarters, not only should these powers be maintained but they should actually be strengthened, in relation both to the setting of minimum standards and in other ways, such as have been initiated with the employment guidelines and the fight against social exclusion. To this end, the so-called open method of coordination should be given a clear status in the Treaty.

It is surprising that the documents distributed contain no reference to the powers conferred by the current Treaty on the social partners to conclude European framework agreements on working conditions.

This is a form of “horizontal” subsidiarity which deserves, on the contrary, to be encouraged, also in terms of its voluntary exercise by the partners in question, thereby fostering the birth of a European industrial relations system. To this end, however, there is a need for trade union rights to be fully recognised by the EU, and this must include their trans-national dimension.

Mr Chairman,

While focussing on some questions, I would not wish to disregard others that are also of great importance for the world of labour.

We believe that the EU should have the powers necessary to make it a political subject on the international stage, and that this is all the more important at this time when the need for democratic governance and social regulation of globalisation processes is so vital. It is equally necessary for the EU to become an area of ever greater freedom, security, and rights for all, including immigrants. From this standpoint, the incorporation of the Nice Charter into the future constitutional Treaty is the first step to be accomplished.

The current system of powers is, on occasion, criticised for its excesses. This may well not be untrue in some fields, though such criticism is frequently a caricature of reality. But I am afraid I can condone no aspersions of excess when it comes to Social Europe.

I believe, on the contrary, that one of the purposes of the Convention is to ensure that the European social model, based on a balance between the market and social justice, is fully reflected in the new constitutional Treaty, so that the world of labour, the young generations, and all citizens, can identify increasingly and ever more deeply with the European venture.