How to promote the social dialogue at national level

Capacity building seminar Serbia.
What are we going to do?

1. We are not talking about Belgium as such, but that is not important in itself.

2. Try to understand what guarantees are needed “for it to work.” What is needed for a social dialogue to function properly?
Belgium = a specific national context enshrined in the text of the social pact of 1945

- Belgium, still today, and in spite of fears arising from the establishment of a right-wing government, can boast of:
  - Social partners deeply rooted in the economic and social history, down to the present day;
  - A high level of unionisation (55% to 57%) with three trade unions, each of which covers all sectors of occupational (public and private) and inter-occupational activity;
  - High degree of organisation of trade union structures.
  - A collective bargaining coverage rate of ±90%.
  - Social partners a priori still interested in the reciprocity of the social dialogue: social peace, game of consensus, preserving the autonomy of the social partners to the maximum at all levels.
A strong and unequivocal trade union message relayed by the press and often taken into account by the political parties…

Employers, and workers, managers of social security, and present in the composition of the labour courts.

The trade unions and employers’ organisations provide services to their members.

Even if criticisms are being heard + impact of the policies of European economic governance and the impact of an enhanced regionalisation to be taken into account.

And above all, historically: Establishment of an inter-occupational consultation, cooperation and negotiation entity – the National Labour Council (CNT) (in ‘52)

A framework law of 5 December 1968 on the general status of collective bargaining agreements and levels of consultation!

The recognition of the sector as level for negotiating wages – not the company, at least not in the front ranks!
In the press, recently...

- “The trade unions represent the greatest forces of democratic change in our history”
- “The existence of counter-powers such as strong trade unions enrich a democracy.”
Some figures by way of elucidation
Chart 1.3: Union density by country. 2000-2008

% of employed dependent labour force

2000 2008
Collective organisation and action of workers

Figure 5.10 Union density per country (2006-2008 and 2009-2011) and per year (1995-2010) in EU27

Source: Visser (2013).

Continued de-unionisation?

Effective collective bargaining depends on, among other factors, the membership rate of the organisations representing the interests of workers and employers (Traxler et al. 2001). Figure 5.10 provides an overview of the development of trade union density in 27 EU member states. The line graphs (right-hand scale) depict the annual development of the (weighted) EU27 average union density over the last two decades. The bar graphs (left-hand scale) ideally compare the average union density in each country per year.

Indeed, when comparing the two periods (2006-8 and 2009-11), there is a group of countries actually displaying an increase – albeit mostly small – in union density. French and Italian unions have been able to recruit more members, while the number of wage- and salary-earners has remained relatively stable. In 2011 Italian union membership (minus pensioners’ unions) even stood at its highest level since 1986.

In many countries, significantly affected by the crisis and the ‘austerity syndrome’ (EE, ES, GR, IE, IT, LT), saw some growth in unionisation, at least until 2011. This finding must first and foremost be explained by the decrease in the denominator, i.e. the drop in the number of wage- and salary-earners having the coverage of collective bargaining and works councils, might explain the further German de-unionisation (Addison et al. 2010), although some unions have been able to increase their membership (Dribusch 2013). Finally, in some countries (DK, FI, SE, UK) the loss in membership has been rather limited (at least up to 2010/2011).

The picture of unionisation in Europe is thus mixed. Considerable divergence in unionisation rates remains (cf. Schnabel 2013). Some unions are indeed still able to recruit new members, sometimes inspired by the ‘organising model’, although in most cases their membership gains cannot keep pace with the increasing labour market participation. In conclusion, the stability or even
Chart 1.8 Union and employer density, 2008

DEBRULLE A.
Chart 1.10: Bargaining coverage, union and employer density, average 2007-9
5. Wage developments and bargaining procedures

Figure 5.9 Collective bargaining coverage (%) and the proportion of low-wage earners (% of total employees in establishments with 10 employees or more), EU28

Sources: Authors’ calculations based on Eurostat 2010 data for the proportion of low-wage earners. ICTWSS database (version April 2013) for collective bargaining coverage; latest available figure for each country. Schultz (2013) for the bargaining coverage data for Germany, Austria and Portugal.
But this coverage rate is bothersome... as is the place of the sectors in collective bargaining
European wage policy interventionism

Figure 5.1 New European wage policy interventionism, 2011-2012

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<th>Recommendations in the field of wages and collective bargaining</th>
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Source: Schuitte and Müller (2013a, 256)

Political intervention in national collective bargaining

The new European system of economic governance that has been put in place in response to the financial and eco-

...
Architecture of industrial relations in Belgium.
The different levels of collective bargaining in Belgium
And their instruments

Intersectoral agreement
Defining the eco and social Program of SP for the two next years
(informal level)

National Labour Council
National and intersectoral agreements
Consultation of the SP.
(Legal framework)

Joint committee
(+/- 100)
Sectoral Collective Agreements

Enterprises
Collective agreements
Three levels made to coexist:

1. In a legal framework which fixes the principle of a hierarchy between the levels and instruments

2. But also through complementarity that creates ascending and descending solidarity.
Conclusions?

One thing is certain, at this stage: the promotion of the social dialogue requires

1. Strong stakeholders on both sides of industry (employers and trade unions): the discussion between the bilateral and trilateral system is too theoretical;

2. Stakeholders who are convinced of the positive contributions of collective bargaining: social peace, autonomy, appropriation of contents, search for compromise... even if their expectations are guided by different agendas (competitiveness versus employment, flexibility versus quality, etc.)

3. The conviction of the executive and legislative power that the social dialogue is a force for change and a guarantee for the democratic functioning of a country: so a framework law is required; Valid also for the European level.

4. The understanding that the sectoral level is not in the way but stands guarantee for inter-occupational solidarity, cohesion and quality of work;

5. A hierarchy framed by the law, between the levels and the results of the social dialogue: soft law is inefficient here.
Thank you for your attention.