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Highly relevant first seminar in Dublin



The first part of the EU-project in Danske Bank Group was a seminar held in Dublin from the 2nd to the 4th of December 2007. The participants were the members of Danske Unions and Bent Jespersen, Senior Vice President, Group HR.

Expert assistance was delivered by Bruno Demaître, Education Officer at the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) who trained the employee representatives on different relevant EU-directives and told about his

own experiences from many years as employee representative (secretary and later chairman) of the FORTIS European Works Council.

Expert input and years of experience from Bruno Demaître

In his presentation Bruno Demaître outlined the frame work of different European directives and explained how the present directives are connected to the European Social Charter which was signed in 1989 – a charter that contained very fundamental rights such as the right of employees to organise, the right to have collective negotiations and the right of employee representatives of receiving information and of being consulted on issues of transnational relevance.



In 1994 this was followed by the first directive on information and consultation systems – that is the European Works Council (EWC).

The right to take initiative towards establishing a European Works Council was placed with the employees. In 1994 49 EWC's were established. Today there are 800-900 functioning EWC's which means that there are many transnational companies that do not yet have European Works Councils.

In 2001 a Statute and a Directive for a European Company (or the SE-company – an abbreviation of the Latin name Societas Europaea) were formulated. And together with this came a directive on information, consultation and participation of employees in the SE-company. A central difference to the former directives is that, when establishing a SE-company, the company must take the initiative towards debating with employee representatives how information, consultation and participation of employees should be structured in the new company.

Just over 100 European Companies have been established, but many of these are shell companies. Within the financial sector the German based insurance company Allianz has been a European Company since 2007.

In 2002 an agreement was reached on a directive on national systems of information and consultation and in 2005 a directive on the procedures of the involvement of employee representatives in case of cross border mergers came into force. The latter contains elements of the EWC-directive and parts of the tightening up presented by the directive dealing with information, consultation and participation of Employees in the SE-company.

At the moment the EU commission is preparing a revision of the EWC-directive from 1989. This has been a wish for a long time, now that the directive is coming up on its twentieth birthday.

The European Works Council (EWC)

Bruno Demaître's presentation focused mainly on the EWC-directive. He pointed out the importance of reading the preamble of a directive, since this is where to find the background and the idea behind a directive.

In the preamble of the EWC directive it is stated, that if a decision taken in one country has consequences for employees in another country, then the employee representatives have the right to be informed and consulted on the matter. Likewise issues that have relevance for employees in more than one country must be dealt with in the EWC. Decisions that markedly influence employees in more countries must be presented to employees as soon as possible.

Bruno Demaître mentioned that the EWC often is the centre of a network of a company's employee representatives. It is important that the employee representatives get to know and understand the different cultures and systems in the different countries represented in the company. Without this mutual understanding it is impossible to make the best possible use of the possibilities that the EWC presents and to gain the inspiration from colleague employee representatives.

In his second presentation Bruno Demaître shared his experiences from the financial company FORTIS, with the participants.

FORTIS, which is a bank as well as an insurance company, has grown a lot since 1990. The number of employees has tripled, the turnover is 28 times bigger and several mergers have been carried through. The latest was the FORTIS acquisition of Retail in Belgium and the global financial institution ABN-AMRO. FORTIS is represented in 12 EU-countries and has a European Works Council with a maximum number of seats of 40 plus a secretary.

The participants got a lot of inspiration towards the contents of a future EWC agreement and the future transnational employee representative work from the presentations.

Bent Jespersen calls for active participation in the EWC

Senior Vice President of Group HR in the Danske Bank Group, Bent Jespersen was invited to the seminar. He did a presentation on the co-operation between the Danske Bank Group and the unions. By way of introduction, Bent Jespersen mentioned that the Danske Bank is the largest bank in Denmark and that the Danske Bank Group is one of the leading financial companies in Northern Europe.

The development of the Danske Bank Group – first the experiences of mergers in Denmark and then international acquisitions – was presented, as well as some of the key concepts such as "One platform – exceptional brands".

On the topic of the collaboration with the employee representatives and the unions they represent, Bent Jespersen mentioned that the Transnational Works Council should primarily

focus on issues which are of cross border interest. It is still the intention to deal with national issues on a national level.

The debate between the employee representatives and Bent Jespersen, showed that the Danske Bank Group and the employee representatives agree, that the Transnational Works Council – now a European Works Council – can be a good setting for discussions and sharing of experiences on topics such as salary systems, the HR-platform and the evaluation of employee satisfaction.



Bent Jespersen stressed that the EWC is a shared responsibility. He took the opportunity to encourage the employee representatives to put issues forward that they would like to see on the agenda of the EWC. Besides the mandatory issues which are the responsibility of the Danske Bank Group the best agenda will be put together if “both sides” take responsibility for delivering input and presentations.

To the question of why the Danske Bank Group has decided to be a partner in the project, Bent Jespersen answered, that being a partner corresponds naturally with the Danske Bank Groups attitude towards the collaboration between the Danske Bank Group, the employee representatives and the local unions.

Very beneficial seminar

This first seminar became highly relevant, since the Danske Bank Group at the same time was planning a cross border merger between Danske Bank and Sampo Bank from Finland. This provided an opportunity to look closely at a possible European Works Council agreement. On Monday the 10th of December a Special Negotiating Body consisting of 19 employee representatives from 12 countries (many of these present at the seminar in Dublin) and the Danske Bank Group reached an agreement on a new European Works Council for the Danske Bank Group.

Robert Thompson, Danske Bank Group Officer at IBOA had the following comment to the seminar in Dublin:

IBOA is encouraged by the Danske Bank Group’s cooperation with Danske Unions and agreement to be a partner in the EU Project initiative. The Dublin seminar reinforced the belief that the Groups attitude and culture is to provide through the EWC a voice for Northern Bank and National Irish Bank staff. This provision provides for the rights of staff to be informed and consulted on transnational matters whilst retaining union negotiation rights at local level on issues into the future for both the employees in Ireland and the UK.



Raili Ikonen, president of RahoitusLeijonat, the local union of Sampo Bank's employees in Finland, says:



I think that the first seminar was just in time. It was very useful to hear how the other companies have built their own EWC's. I believe that we all got some very valuable information. In short, it was a good start – but very much will depend on us. We must have similar thoughts and aims regarding how we will continue with our international co-operation.