

## **Key achievements of Vladimír Špidla, Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (Barroso I Commission)**

### **Supporting employment and tackling the crisis**

In 2007, EU leaders agreed a series of common principles to guide employment policies and make labour markets more flexible and secure – the flexicurity approach. And in 2008, the European Commission launched the New Skills for New Jobs initiative, to better match people's skills with the jobs available and prepare for the labour market of tomorrow.

Before the crisis hit European labour markets, the EU's Growth and Jobs Strategy had previously succeeded in reducing unemployment in the EU to a record low of 6.8%. Since then, the Commission has actively promoted a coordinated response to the crisis, working with Member States on the most effective ways to tackle rising unemployment, keeping people in work and getting people who have lost their jobs back into work. This was exemplified by the Jobs Summit in May 2009 after which the Commission put forward a 'shared commitment for employment' to preserve jobs and help those facing difficulties while paving the way for recovery. In addition, together with the Swedish Presidency, the Commission developed a toolkit of practical ways to fight the crisis.

The Commission also proposed changes to both the European Globalisation Fund and the European Social Fund so as to make them more effective tools during the crisis. In July 2009, the Commission proposed the setting-up of a new microfinance facility with an initial budget of €100 million providing microcredit to small businesses and to people who have lost their jobs and want to start their own businesses. Both Council and Parliament welcomed the proposal and it is hoped that they will reach final agreement shortly.

### **Dealing with globalisation**

In 2005 the European Union established the European Globalisation adjustment Fund (EGF) to help workers who lose their jobs as a consequence of globalisation. In June 2009, the EGF's rules were revised to strengthen its role as an early intervention instrument as part of Europe's response to the economic crisis. There have been 43 applications to the EGF since the start of its operations in January 2007, for a total amount of about €247.5 million, helping some 46,000 workers. During 2008, 69% of workers helped by the EGF found new jobs through retraining, by founding start-ups or by moving to areas with better job opportunities.

## **Investing in skills**

The European Social Fund (ESF) is the EU's main tool for investing in people's skills, supporting employment and promoting cohesion. The new programming period launched in 2007 and running until 2013 represents around 10% of the EU budget and invests some €10 billion to train approximately 9 million people every year and help 2 million find new jobs. The ESF has also been one of the EU's main tools to help tackle the social impact of the crisis as the Commission helped Member States' programmes to adapt quickly to focus on saving and creating jobs.

## **Taking on demographic change**

In 2005, the Commission laid out the causes and implications of an ageing population in a major public consultation, bringing demographic change into the mainstream of policy-making at EU and national level. It also set up the Demography Forum, a group of national experts, and issued regular 'demography reports' to support the ongoing debate. By way of follow-up in 2007, the Commission set out the way family-friendly policies could support sustainability and contribute to the goals of the EU's Growth and Jobs Strategy. And in 2008, the Commission launched a package of measures to help Europeans achieve a better work-life balance, including a proposal for longer and better maternity leave and a report on childcare provision.

## **Tackling poverty together**

Since the EU launched its system for coordinating national policies to tackle poverty and social exclusion ten years ago, all 27 Member States have developed multi-annual national action plans. In 2001, only three Member States had such strategies in place.

The EU's involvement encourages high standards based on commonly agreed objectives, while each country can implement flexible policies that acknowledge the different national contexts. Child poverty is an example of an issue that has taken centre stage in all Member States thanks to EU action.

The principles of 'active inclusion' will be at the core of the EU's future 2020 strategy for growth, jobs and cohesion and 2010 is the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion.

## **Ensuring equal treatment for all agency workers**

In 2008, the European Parliament and the Council of the EU agreed new legislation on temporary agency work which will come into force next year. Over three million temporary agency workers across the EU will benefit from better protection of their working conditions. The agreement also shows that an EU of 27 Member States can take decisions and deliver tangible benefits for workers in Europe.

## **Health and safety at work**

In 2007, the Commission launched a new strategy for health and safety at work, with the objective of reducing by 25% the number of occupational accidents in the EU by 2012. And over the past five years, the European social partners have negotiated a number of agreements to improve health and safety at work, for example to tackle harassment, injuries and infections in hospitals and exposure to crystalline silica dust.

## **Managing change in a socially responsible way**

In December 2008, the Council adopted a new Directive to improve the role of European Works Councils in informing and consulting employees. European Works Councils (EWCs) currently operate in 820 major companies across the EU, covering some 14.5 million employees. The new rules will make sure EWCs can play their full role in managing the process of globalisation in a balanced way and help people to take advantage of the opportunities it offers.

## **Guaranteeing the right to work anywhere in the European Union**

The right to move to and work in any Member State is a fundamental principle of the EU, but several countries applied temporary restrictions to limit access to their labour markets for workers from the countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007. By successfully demonstrating the significant economic contribution made by mobile workers to their host countries, the Commission has encouraged Member States to lift remaining restrictions on free movement of workers. As a result, most Member States no longer apply restrictions. And thanks to updated rules on social security coordination agreed in July 2009, people can maintain their rights to benefits when they work in another country and can therefore move around the EU more easily.

## **Easy access to medical treatment when travelling**

The free European Health Insurance Card now gives peace of mind to over 180 million people, making sure they get the treatment they have a right to if they fall ill or have an accident when abroad. It was introduced in 2004 and can be used in some 31 countries, simplifying procedures for getting medical care if disaster strikes when you are in another European country.

## **Facilitating better work-life balance for women and men**

Parents will have the right to longer parental leave – allowing them to better balance family and work life – under the revised Parental Leave Directive agreed by Member States in November 2009. The new rules, based on an agreement negotiated by European social partners, also give more incentives to fathers to take the leave, strengthening women's position in employment. In September 2008, the Commission also proposed to strengthen women's entitlement to better and longer maternity leave and to improve the situation of self-employed women.

## **Ensuring protection from discrimination**

Around one in three Europeans say they have witnessed a case of discrimination in the past year and around one in seven say they have personally experienced it. Under EU legislation, everyone has the right to equal treatment at the workplace, whatever their race or ethnic origin, age, sexual orientation, religion or belief, and whether or not they have a disability. In July 2008, the Commission proposed to extend protection from all of these forms of discrimination to areas outside employment, such as social protection, healthcare, education and access to goods and services. The proposal has been supported by the European Parliament and is now before the Council of the EU.

The Commission has also taken legal action where necessary to make sure existing legislation to guarantee equal treatment is properly implemented and enforced across Europe. As a result, several countries have amended their laws or introduced new ones and people there can now enjoy the same rights against discrimination as elsewhere in the EU.

## **Improving Roma inclusion**

Over the past five years the Commission has stepped up its efforts to improve inclusion of Roma in Europe by promoting joint action by various players at national and EU level. It set up a new platform for Roma inclusion and in June 2009, EU countries endorsed a set of Common Basic Principles for Roma Inclusion, designed to help guide national policies. In addition, the Commission is continuing to enforce EU anti-discrimination legislation and provide financial support for projects and programmes to improve Roma inclusion.

## **Social partners improving working conditions**

European social dialogue – the dialogue between trade unions and employers at EU level – complements the national practices of social dialogue and industrial relations which exist in all Member States. It helps to define European social standards and plays a vital role in the governance of the EU, while bringing concrete benefits to workers and employers in Europe – both in specific sectors and across the workplaces as a whole.

Since 2004, the social partners at European level have negotiated specific agreements to:

- prevent injuries to healthcare workers from needlesticks and cut the risk of infections (2009);
- improve working conditions for seafarers (2008);
- manage problems of bullying, sexual harassment and physical violence at the workplace (2007);
- reduce the exposure of workers to crystalline silica dust, which can lead to silicosis, a potentially fatal lung condition (2006).