



Today, there is a relative consensus between social partners, national governments and European institutions on the policies to be implemented to deal with the pandemic and its consequences.”

Social dialogue in times of pandemic

Have the economic and social consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic had a particular impact on the dynamics of social dialogue in Europe and in the Member States? Have the social partners been involved in the elaboration and implementation of measures taken by governments and European institutions to deal with the socio-economic emergency caused by the pandemic? There are two main sources of data that can be instrumental in answering these questions. First is a draft Eurofound report on the involvement of national social partners in the elaboration and implementation of emergency measures taken by national governments (Eurofound, forthcoming). This report, based on information provided by the European agency's network of national correspondents, focuses mainly on tripartite social dialogue, in particular in the context of the European Semester. Secondly, the other source of relevant information is data from an ETUI analysis of the European sectoral social dialogue. The European Commission provides data on the texts adopted by the European social partners in the formal framework of the European Social Dialogue Committees, at both the cross-industry and sectoral levels (European Commission 2020d). But the ETUI has developed its own database on sectoral dialogue, which includes additional data (such as texts adopted outside the formal framework of the Committees). It is these two sources of data (Eurofound and the ETUI) which are used in the following section to make an initial assessment of the role of the social partners in managing the crisis caused by Covid-19 (please note that these data do not cover the last two months of the year 2020).

Tripartite social dialogue: a relative consensus

A first observation to be made concerns a comparison with the financial crisis of 2008. The political remedies needed to address that crisis, the causes of which were to be found in the financial industry, strongly divided opinion not just amongst the social partners, but also governments and the European institutions (Degryse 2012). Today, there is a relative consensus between social partners, national governments and European institutions on the policies to be implemented to deal with the pandemic and its consequences. However, it must be kept in mind that in 2020 Europe is still only in the first phase of the crisis, a phase of emergency measures. Other phases will follow, possibly including some form of austerity and profound transformations in the labour market (more automation, long-term decline of certain types of labour, increased inequalities, a possible shift towards unstable forms of employment, more platform work, further precarisation of employment in at least some sectors, the emergence of new professions and the erosion of others, etc.). There

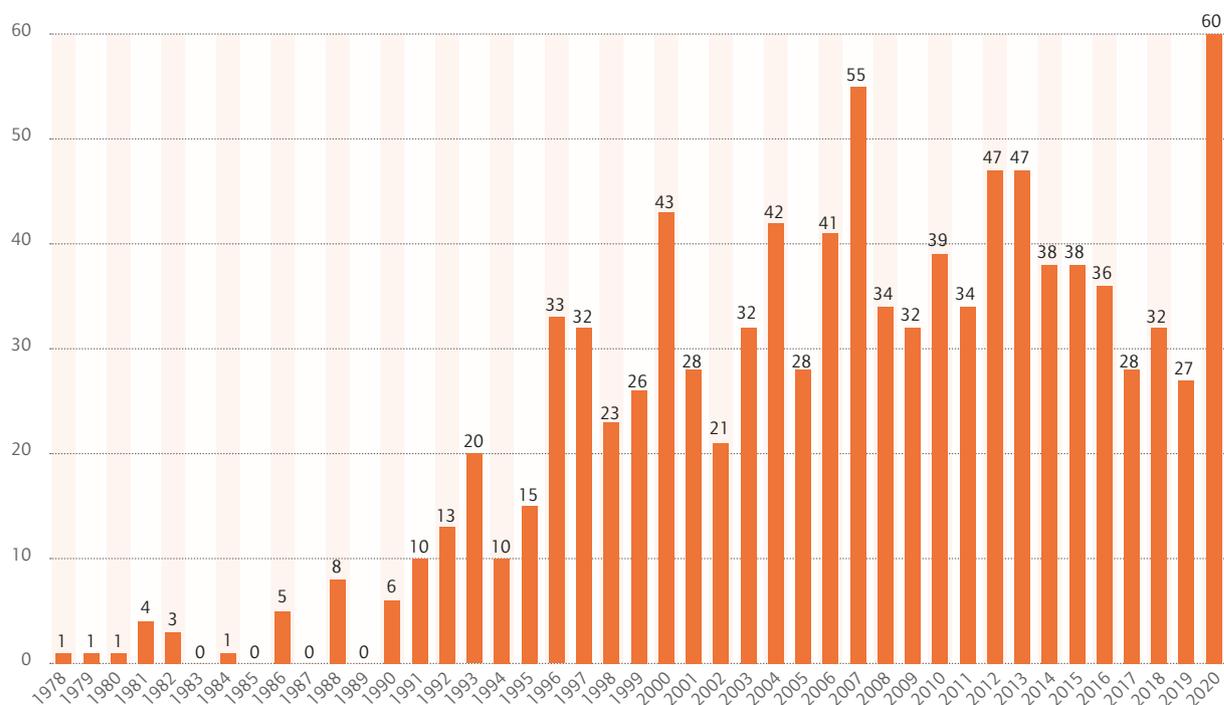
will also possibly be a phase in which it is considered necessary to 'rewrite the rules of the economy' (Stiglitz 2020). It will thus be very interesting to observe whether the current relative consensus, possibly stemming from a commonly shared shock over the pandemic, will withstand these later phases and translate into a common exit strategy. The various consequences of the pandemic will overlap with other powerful currents and challenges shaping the future of the EU: the transition towards a green economy, political right-wing populism, and the forging of a future institutional form ('multi-speed Europe', a transition towards more federalism, the role of the EU in new policy areas, etc.) (see Chapter 7 in this volume). All of these challenges are also very relevant for the social partners.

An exceptional situation

The Eurofound report highlights the urgency of the situation in 2020 and the difficulty, in this particular context, of engaging in in-depth consultations with the social partners on the economic and social measures to be taken and implemented. Various economic and social constraints imposed, in particular, through the European Semester (i.e. the implementation of country-specific recommendations and the elaboration of national reform plans) will have been the main obstacle to a greater involvement of national social partners. Eurofound notes the social partners' recognition of the particularly difficult circumstances, but also the fact that they consider that the majority of governments could have done much better in involving them in decision-making and implementation. Of course, these assessments vary greatly from country to country. In some countries, the social partners have been involved (to varying extents), while in others the health crisis seems to have revealed pre-existing structural weaknesses in the systems of social dialogue and industrial relations. In yet other countries, consultations were weak, but the social partners supported the initiatives taken by their governments, without amplifying conflict. In others, the actors had divergent views on the measures taken.

Despite these differences, Eurofound notes that 'unlike the context of the last financial and economic recession, there has been a mostly shared understanding between social partners, governments and European institutions on the policy responses needed to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and promote economic recovery'. This has also been observed at the company level, where solutions for the protection of workers' health and safety have generally been found in a collective manner, as well as in the implementation of new forms of work (telework, video-conferencing, etc.). From this point of view, social dialogue and collective bargaining (see Chapter 4) have proven to be an indispensable

Figure 6.19 Number of joint texts adopted by the European sectoral social partners (1978-2020*)



Source : ETUI, European Social Dialogue database (www.esddb.eu forthcoming).
* Figures for 2020 until 1/11/2020.

tool for managing this exceptional situation as smoothly as possible.

European Social Dialogue

At cross-industry level, the social partners (ETUC, BusinessEurope, CEEP, SMEUnited) adopted a joint declaration on the emergency situation created by the pandemic on 16 March 2020 (ETUC et al. 2020). This short text declares its support for the measures announced by the Commission and the European Central Bank to counter the economic impact of the coronavirus (Commission, 2020c), and encourages the Member States to approve and rapidly implement these measures by involving the social partners at national level.

At the sectoral level, the dynamics of social dialogue were undoubtedly strengthened during the critical early phases of the pandemic. Never in the history of the European social dialogue have so many joint texts been adopted by the social partners in less than a year. From January to the end of October 2020, some 60 texts were signed by the sectoral social partners, compared with 27 over the whole of the previous year (the previous quantitative 'record' was in 2007, with 55 texts) (see Figure 6.19).

Of these 60 texts, 45 are directly linked to the pandemic. These texts are to be found in the sectors which have been hit the hardest: civil aviation (4 texts), maritime transport (4), sea fishing (3), followed by commerce, live performance, professional football, and private security, but also the steel industry and the agro-food industry (2 texts each). Also included are road transport, construction, industrial cleaning, tourism and catering, education, temporary work, and others.

As far as their content is concerned, the vast majority of these texts are addressed to the European

institutions and national public authorities, and usually structured around two elements: a description of the economic difficulties caused by the pandemic in the sector in question (risks of bankruptcy, restructuring, job losses), and requests for the adaptation of sectoral public policies to support the sector and, where appropriate, for measures to protect workers' health.

According to the classification in the ETUI European Social Dialogue database (Degryse, 2015), these 'joint opinions' linked to the pandemic reveal, above all, a dynamic of 'joint lobbying' of public authorities by the sectoral social partners (European and national). The aim is to make public authorities aware of the positions of the actors in the sector and their demands in terms of sectoral policy – and not to develop reciprocal commitments that would be reflected in collective agreements on, for example, the improvement of working conditions.

Of the 45 Covid texts, 37 are 'joint opinions', 5 are 'recommendations' addressed directly to enterprises and related to the health protection of workers, and 3 are declarations (again according to the ETUI classification: see Figure 6.20).

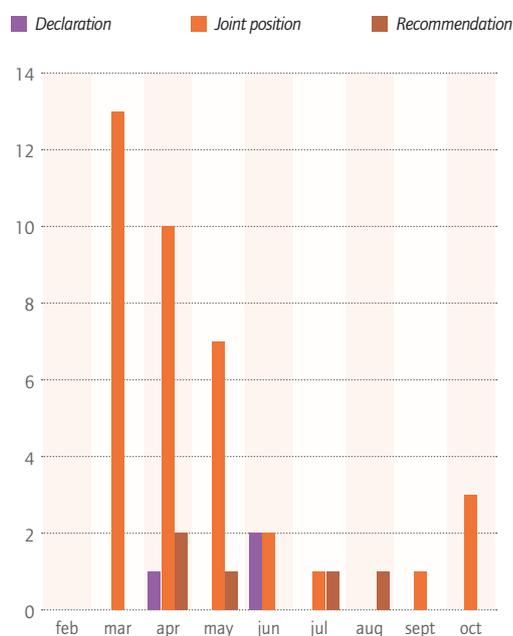
The 'newcomers'

It should be noted that some sectors which are not officially structured, mainly due to the fact that the employers' organisations are not recognised by the EU as European social partners, have also negotiated joint texts: in particular the social and personal care services sector (11 million workers in the EU), which brought together EPSU and the European Federation of Social Employers; but also the personal assistance services sector (early childhood care and education, childcare, long-term care in situations of dependency, disability, etc.), and household support services (cleaning, ironing, gardening, maintenance,



Social dialogue and collective bargaining have proven to be an indispensable tool for managing the Covid-19 crisis as smoothly as possible."

Figure 6.20 'Covid' texts of sectoral social dialogue: a strong 'joint lobbying' dimension



ETUI, European Social Dialogue database (www.esddb.eu forthcoming).
* Figures for 2020 until 1/11/2020.

tutoring, etc.) which brought together the European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism (EFFAT) and Uni-Europa for workers, and the European Federation for Family and Home Care (EFFE) and the European Federation for Services to Individuals (EFSI) for the employers' side. The travel agency and tour operator sector also made its voice heard by adopting a joint text with Uni-Europa. Another example, at the global level this time, is the call by the Universal Postal Union and Uni-Global Union for the health protection of postal workers worldwide.

The absent ones

Among the sectors absent from this 'Covid-19' social dialogue (at the time of writing), we find, not surprisingly, industries less directly affected such as shipyards, extractive industries, electricity, gas and paper. Two more notable absences will, however, attract attention: that of hairdressing – a sector which is generally quite active at the European level and also strongly impacted by the pandemic – and the even more surprising absence of the hospital sector. In fact, one of the long-planned regional workshops aimed at strengthening social dialogue in the hospital sector in central Europe had to be cancelled/postponed due to the pandemic (read more on occupational safety and health and its relation to the general public health services in Chapter 5).