



CECOP

CICOPA Europe

**European Confederation of
Worker Cooperatives,
Social cooperatives and
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“Relations between federations of worker and social cooperatives and trade unions in Europe”

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CECOP, the sectoral member of Cooperatives Europe for industrial, service and craft cooperatives and employee-owned enterprises, has full members in 18 countries of the European Union out of 27, which federate around 60 000 enterprises generating an aggregate turnover of 45 billion € (750 000 € per enterprise on the average) and employing 1.3 million workers (22 per enterprise on the average), around 900 000 (70%) of whom are worker-members.

In fact, the status of the worker-members in such enterprises is a difficult issue, because it generates a unique type of labour relation which can be assimilated neither to conventional wage labour nor to self-employment, as was formally recognized in a “world declaration on worker cooperatives” approved by the last ICA general assembly. This unique type of labour relations has often been both a point of attraction and of attrition with the trade union organisations.

Where it exists, direct institutionalised social dialogue between cooperative organisations and trade unions in our sector usually place within the framework of inter-sectoral cooperative organisations, the two main examples being Italy and Sweden. In both countries, those organisations have an official status of employer organisation. Thus, they discuss all issues that employer organisation discuss with trade unions, and first of all collective agreements. In Italy, their sectoral organisations in industry and service intervene in specific issues related to their own typologies, eg discussions on the worker-member law and the labour situation of disadvantaged and disabled workers.

In some countries, the cooperative organisations in our sector are not formally nor completely considered as employer organisations within the framework of social dialogue, but discuss specific policy issues (eg the SCE, wage savings) with trade unions, with which they generally have good relations, eg in France and Romania. In France, the construction federation affiliated to the worker cooperative confederation has a specific social dialogue position in the country. CGSCOP also works through the French federation of social economy employees (which is, however, not formally recognized within social dialogue).

In other countries, the cooperative organisations of our sector are represented in social dialogue in as much as they are members of the national employer organisation, eg in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Bulgaria.

In other countries, the cooperative organisations representing our sector are not involved in social dialogue, be it direct, indirect or specific. In some of those countries, those cooperative organisations have more or less regular relations with the trade unions, eg Spain and Poland. In the UK and Germany, relations are almost inexistent, probably also because our sector in those countries is still rather small. It is also very weak, for obvious reasons, in countries where cooperatives in our sector have emerged only over the last few years, eg Finland, Estonia and Slovenia.

When the relations are not institutionalized (neither directly nor indirectly nor on specific issues or sectors), the cooperative organisation generally has no mandate from its member cooperatives to engage in social dialogue. An exception is Spain, which is a borderline case, in the sense that enterprises in our sector have such a critical mass that many of the conditions could be met for their organisations to engage formally in social dialogue. One of the main stumbling blocks in Spain is the statute of self-employed of most worker-members of cooperatives.

Concerning the rate of affiliation of individual workers to a trade union, it is usually linked to the national average (even though it can be somewhat higher or lower), except in central – eastern Europe, where it is substantially lower (in Poland it is lower, but not as low as in the other countries of the region). It is true that the highest levels of unionisation are also found in the countries where the organisations have a formal direct role in social dialogue (Sweden, Denmark, Italy, Malta), but both phenomena seem to be linked to a large extent to a strong national labour culture based on collective agreements. In turn, in the central-eastern European countries where the sectoral cooperative organisations are involved in social dialogue within the framework of the employer organisation, the rate of unionisation is very low.

Furthermore, being at the national negotiating table for the collective agreements does not always entail a close and creative relation with the trade unions in the field of public policies. While maintaining regularly their collective agreement negotiating role, the Italian cooperative organisations have had their ups and downs with the trade unions as far as public policies in our sector are concerned. For example, a high level of creativity could be found in the late 1980s (eg with the approval of the Marcora law), and a new phase seem to have started in September last year together with the agreement on the SCE, after a rather low ebb. In France and Romania, where the cooperative organisations are not really in a full-fledged social dialogue position, they discuss a number of important policy issues with the trade unions.

It is more this relation on policy issues which we are trying to develop at the European level with ETUC. Cecop has had a series of exchange projects with ETUC in the past, and we have recently resumed this relation on specific policy issues. The focus of the relation is on the modalities of worker participations in enterprises with a majority of worker-members-owners. We are having an ongoing project with ETUC, called "Involve", precisely on this topic. The ongoing CECOP-ETUC action looks at the following issues:

- Reach a better understanding of "worker ownership" ("travail associé" in French), on the basis of the world standards included in the above-mentioned "world declaration on worker cooperatives" approved by the ICA, and which are an application of the cooperative principles to the world of labour (it is clear that the cooperative principles do not have exactly the same implications for a worker-member as for a consumer-member or a member of a housing cooperative);
- Analyse the different typologies of non-member workers (30% on the average in Europe), which are divided roughly equally between workers in probationary periods, transitory workers, and a 10% that is destined to remain for a long time in the enterprise without becoming a member for a series of possible reasons).
- Analyse the systems of training and audit in the field of worker participation.

- Reach specific standards agreed upon with ETUC on worker participation in future SCEs in our sector (higher than in the SCE directive), but hopefully also in ordinary enterprises of our sector.
- Establish a common monitoring system.

There is a strong potential to work on policy issues with ETUC, working on how our practices can be useful policy examples to address the central issue now in Europe of restructuring (in the wider sense of the term) in the single market and globalisation, thus including: the potential to save activities that would otherwise be closing down but also the potential to create and save jobs that do not delocalise, to do social inclusion, to create new craft and service activities through self-help, to impact on local development, and at the same time to face the diversification, adaptation, innovation and internationalisation of activities, and this not only by isolated enterprise, but through a whole array of “meso-level” support institutions such as mutual financing tools, consulting agencies, consortia, etc. Indeed, our experience, though numerically small, is extremely meaningful and up-to-date in addressing together some of the EU’s central issues in terms of local development, restructuring and globalisation.

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