Reduction in working time

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The rapporteur, Mr Rocard (PSE, F), emphasised that the sole purpose of his report was to call on the Commission to examine a new taxation policy that would be more effective in combating the rise in unemployment levels. Accepting that the problem of mass unemployment would not be solved within the next few years and that the services sector was no longer capable of taking in workers from industry, the rapporteur called on policy makers to look at introducing reduced working times, which was a potential solution that had still not been considered. Ruling out any sudden or uniform imposition of such a process by legal means, Mr Rocard called on the public authorities to promote negotiations at company level. However, if the call for a reduction in working hours were to gain acceptance there would have to be some agreement on maintaining wage levels. This was why the rapporteur proposed using the only available reserve, namely 4.5% of GNP, which was intended as a means of support for the unemployed yet did not necessarily create one single job. The money saved could therefore be made available to companies as compensation for losses in salary. Mr Rocard also announced that he had changed the title of the text in question in order to take account of demands from the EPP and Liberal Groups; he also wanted to defuse any potential conflict situation by calling on the majority of Parliament to support him in his efforts, which were aimed at validating a concept and certainly not at introducing European legislation in this area. As far as the Council was concerned Mrs Fitzgerald thought that a reduction in working hours could improve the current situation by as much as 1%; while this was not insignificant, neither was it enough to solve the problem. She also referred to this issue by describing the situation as extremely complex. The problem of organising a division of working hours was part of a global debate that also involved the division of income. Inasmuch as the reduction in working hours was difficult to envisage without a loss in revenue, the consequences of such a scheme had to be taken into account. Allowance also had to be made for workers who, for want of a higher salary, wished to work additional hours. Finally, this issue had to be examined in a global context and efforts had to be made to promote a model that was more flexible and at the same time more competitive. Nevertheless, she welcomed the Rocard report, which had stimulated a great deal of reflection, as a valuable contribution to the unemployment problem, an issue to which the Irish Presidency had attached much importance. Commissioner Flynn also welcomed the work done by Mr Rocard, especially for his constructive approach based on cooperation and dialogue. For its part the Commission was engaged in preparing a Green Paper on the organisation of the labour market, including working hours, which had been drawn up as a response to an initiative from Parliament. The redistribution of working hours had to be introduced against a background of greater flexibility, including the use of additional training measures and the introduction of collective agreements. The Commissioner gave his assurance that every connection between reduced working hours, productivity and salary levels would be examined in detail in order to take account of the different aspects involved according to the sector of activity, the country and the social security system concerned. Mr Flynn also said that by following the initiative launched by the Commission the social partners had initiated a debate that was aimed at reaching a balanced agreement at European level on part-time work.