Employers deliver recommendations to 5th ASEM Labour Ministers’ Conference in Sofia, Bulgaria

IOE and BUSINESSEUROPE joined five employer organisations at the social partners’ dialogue forum in advance of the ASEM Labour and Employment Ministers’ Conference in Sofia on 3 December. Working closely with members, both ahead of and during the meeting, the IOE and BUSINESSEUROPE supported the employers’ statement to the labour ministers’, whose recommendations will be made to their Leaders next year. Key employer messages were presented, among others, on youth employment and global supply chains.

The ministerial outcome document, the Sofia Declaration, addressed four key themes (see link in side panel): enhancing youth labour market outcomes; promoting decent work and safer workplaces in global supply chains; promoting adequate social protection systems for growth and jobs; and future cooperation.

The Declaration recognised that the success of Sustainable Development Goal 8 depended on the "active engagement of young people in the economy and society". Here, echoing Employers’ calls, the need was highlighted for the removal of barriers preventing young people from acquiring decent and productive employment in the formal economy, and for "the right incentives for private businesses to promote work-based learning" and for "enhancing the labour-market relevance of education and training programmes".

With half of workers in some Asian countries and around one-third of workers in Europe holding a job linked to global supply chains, the ministers recognised the value. However, they also noted "that global supply chains were often associated with infringements of ILO core labour standards". This weakness could, they stated, be attributed to several
factors - "limitations in implementation and enforcement of labour and work-related health and safety rules" resulting from insufficient capacity, lack of prevention and absence of awareness, but also to "insufficient due diligence" of businesses.

IOE Deputy Secretary-General, Roberto Suárez Santos was particularly mindful to underline that global supply chains were not per se a problem, but rather "a driver of economic growth, jobs and prosperity". He also said that the complexity of global supply chains made concrete opportunities for influence dependent on a multitude of factors and highlighted the need for the exchange of good practice to clearly understand which initiatives successfully addressed the issues on the ground.

Roberto Suárez once again commended the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights for their clarity on the attribution of distinct obligations and responsibilities in the event of negative human rights impacts of business operations and the provision of access to remedy.

In terms of future ASEM cooperation, the following upcoming events were anticipated: Germany (sustainable supply chains); Indonesia (social protection), Italy (youth employment), and Singapore (OSH).

Employers particularly welcomed the labour ministers' recommendation for the deeper engagement of business and labour in the ASEM process, which followed the Employers' message that the European Commission had not issued invitations to employers' organisations sufficiently in time to ensure the participation of a higher number of business organisations, although coordination and the direct involvement of five, as well as the IOE and BUSINESSEUROPE, had allowed for a concise business message on the key issues to the Ministers, as well as to the European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills & Labour Mobility, Marianne Thyssen.

The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) was created in 1996 as an informal process of dialogue and cooperation which addresses political, economic and cultural issues, with the objective of strengthening the relationship between the two regions. The ASEM Summit is a biennial meeting of the Heads of State and Government, the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission, and the Secretary-General of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The 20th Anniversary Summit will take place in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, in July 2016.