



EWC reaction to the Covid crisis-19

21/04/2020. In addition to IR Notes n°138 we have again contacted EWC secretaries on the consequences of the pandemic. Here is a summary of our analysis, which is available in full in French (it will be completed in the coming days with the testimonies received after the closure of IR Notes). We are also providing this English version translated via Deepl, which is of much lower quality than IR Notes, but which may help you. Do not hesitate to share your initiatives and testimonials with us to enrich our analysis (frederic.t@irshare.eu).

- **A freeze on all physical meetings.** In practice, the European works councils are at a standstill. Physical meetings are postponed, as plenary (LafargeHolcim), steering committees (Suez), working groups (Generali, Suez), training (Carrefour), on-site missions (Suez). The same applies to agreement renegotiations at **ArcelorMittal** where "a renegotiation, with a view to reducing the resources of the European Works Council, in terms of number of members and number of meetings, is frozen", underlines Jean-Luc Ruffin, CGT representative within the select committee.
- **An acceleration of exchanges.** Virtually, however, the EWCs remain active. For example, on 11 April, the secretariat of the European Works Council of **BNP Paribas** and the representatives of the UNI Finance and Fecec trade union federations had a conference call with the group's human resources managers. "We took stock of the measures taken in the various countries and the continuity of the European social dialogue", says Gabriel Di Letizia, secretary of the European Works Council. In some groups, the pace of meetings has clearly accelerated. At **LafargeHolcim**, a weekly telephone meeting with simultaneous English/French translation is held between the secretary, the trade union coordinators and the Group HRD and the European HRD. Each time, the aim is to take stock of the Group's economic situation in each European country while addressing other issues. The same participants also held a telephone meeting on 7 April dedicated to the Covid-19 crisis, with simultaneous translation, which was also attended by the members of the EWC Health and Safety Committee and managers in charge of health and safety at group level. On 2 April, the management of the **Eiffage** construction group organised a joint conference call between the European Works Council office and the office of the Group Works Council France to review the situation. At **Suez**, "a review is carried out each week with the HR department, the Industrial relations department and the health and safety department," explains Franck Reinhold, secretary of the Suez European Works Council. I am present as secretary of the body with the 5 trade union coordinators of the French trade unions as well as the secretary and deputy secretary of the French Group Works Council also take part". The objective is to "maintain exchanges every week", according to the report. Meetings are also held on a regular basis at **Carrefour**. "With the deputy secretary, Francesco Barazzetta, who works in Milan, we asked for and obtained, explains Michel Enguelz, secretary of the Carrefour European Works Council, the holding of meetings of the select committee (6 members)". Three meetings have already been held on 30 March, 10 April and 21 April. Pierre Goulaieff, secretary of the **Capgemini** International Works Council (a European Works Council with observers representing non-EU countries), spoke of "a constant and permanent

dialogue at board level" with the holding, on 11 March, of a "first exceptional crisis board". Our meeting rhythm is normally one meeting per month, and we quickly agreed to double this rhythm during the crisis period. We are already at 4 extraordinary meetings". At **Generali**, a Skype call between the secretary of the European Works Council, the deputy secretary and their Group HR contacts has been organised every Monday afternoon since March. The Select Committee of the **Renault** Group Works Council (11 members) has been meeting weekly with management since 20 March.

- **A reluctance from certain directions.** Meetings with management are more difficult to set up in some groups. Cristina Filippelli, secretary of **Legrand's** European Works Council, points out that "by dint of insistence, the committee's bureau has obtained from the management a video conference, even without an interpreter, for 21 April, in order to get the most precise and satisfactory assessment of the situation". Since the end of March, the Board has been requesting information on the impact of the crisis on the business and on employees, country by country, as well as on the measures implemented (short-time working, forced leave, etc.), but management has stressed that it could not give an update on a situation that is constantly changing and, moreover, some of the people it was able to contact were unreachable", says Cristina Fillipelli. Similarly, little information was communicated to the **Bel** European Works Council. "The information that I have, I get mainly from my own professional activity, which is about Europe," explains Martine Peyronnet, secretary of the Bel European Works Council. I have just initiated a discussion with the members of the European Works Council to exchange more "field" information". Several European works councils, to compensate for the lack of information from management or to get their own view of the effects of the Covid-19 crisis, have taken initiatives to send information back via committee members, using a questionnaire in the form of a file (**Safran, Legrand, Veolia**) or online (**Eiffage**), an Excel table to be filled in by members (**Generali**). "We are trying to exchange information directly between members of the European Works Council, as the only information from management was an audio-conference meeting with the European Works Council Bureau, with little information," said Jean-Luc Ruffin, CGT member of **ArcelorMittal's** European Works Council Select Committee. "We will be sending out an online questionnaire with translation in order to better understand the social situations and the conditions of takeovers depending on the country," emphasizes Philippe Luppo, secretary of the European Works Council of **Eiffage**. Information can also be passed on thanks to a meeting between the members of the European Works Council. A meeting with simultaneous interpretation is therefore planned between the board and some members of the Eiffage European Works Council. Within the **Renault** Group Works Council (which covers all EU and non-EU countries), we exchange information from all countries on a very regular basis," explains Eric Vidal, secretary of the Renault Group Works Council. I inform the 40 members and receive information from them, which I have translated by Deepl or Google Translation. The best of the two tools is Deepl, but it doesn't have all the languages of the Committee, which has 12 different ones.
- **Varying quality of virtual conferences.** Some European works councils have used tools already in place in the company, such as Microsoft Teams, Webex, Skype, which make the organisation of meetings easier, especially when interpretation is not required. "Our working language is English, so we don't have any problems organising translation," says Pierre Goulaieff, secretary of **Capgemini's** European Works Council. "The meetings of the bureau with the management are organized with Teams, but without interpretation, which poses a difficulty for the Spanish member", warns Philippe Luppo, secretary of the European Works Council of **Eiffage**. At **Carrefour**, meetings are held by videoconference, using the Google Meet system. "Interpreters for Spanish and Dutch are provided, with the rest of the

participants speaking in French," Michel Engelz explains. From a practical point of view, meetings of the select committee with **Renault** management are held by Teams, with simultaneous translation," explains Éric Vidal, secretary of the Renault Group Works Council. This goes very well, because for many years the exchanges between the committee and management have been rich and lively, and are conducted in a respectful manner, and all the players know each other well". For Hélène Debegnac, secretary of the **LafargeHolcim** European Works Council, "telephone meetings with simultaneous translation are acceptable when there are only two languages, even if there are sometimes cuts. There are also some interpretation errors (mainly on figures), which could be avoided if a written support was given in advance. On the other hand, it becomes very complicated with several languages, so it is essential to receive a written support beforehand". Sometimes the virtual mixture with interpretation is not successful. We made an attempt to hold a bureau meeting with Teams for the videoconference, which worked well, coupled with the Interactio system, which transmits the interpretation via a smartphone," explains Martine Peyronnet, secretary of the **Bel** European works council. "Each member has to install an App on his or her smartphone or tablet, and the interpreters work remotely. Each member speaks on the Teams connection and connects in his or her language on the App and receives the exchanges in his or her language. It worked for a few minutes for a few countries, it was very good. The concern is that it only lasted a few minutes, so we had to abandon the meeting during the preparation and the bureau meeting was cancelled because some participants do not speak English or French. New tests are planned". "Finally, it is not uncommon, especially for meetings held without the presence of management, for system D to win. We tested a conf-call between members of the select committee via Jitsi," explains Carole Bourner, secretary of the European Works Council at **Generali**, "but it's far from simple because neither Italian nor Spanish speaks English. So we had to work hard with the family for some of them and with each other for the multilingual ones, but it's quite tiring! ».

- **Differences in treatment.** In addition to discussions on the impact of the pandemic, two subjects of friction animate the European Works Councils: the first concerns the distribution of dividends relating to the year 2019, which is contested by the European Trade Union Confederation. In its view, these sums should remain in the company to consolidate cash flow and compensate for the loss of earnings of employees placed on short-time working or forced leave. Questioned by its European Works Council, **Eiffage**'s management confirmed that the board of directors had waived the 2019 dividends paid in 2020. On the other hand, **LafargeHolcim**'s European Works Council has sent the group's CEO, Chairman of the Board and members of the Executive Committee "a letter of protest against the distribution of a dividend identical to that of 2019", underlines Hélène Debegnac, secretary of the European Works Council. Discussions also took place at **Generali**, which decided to pay half of the planned dividend while setting up a solidarity fund. The second subject concerns the unequal treatment of European employees. Indeed, the avalanche of national measures to deal with the pandemic and the lack of European harmonisation in terms of short-time working leads to a great heterogeneity in the responses provided by the groups, all the more so when it leaves a great deal of latitude to local management. At **Carrefour**, "we have observed very different practices depending on the country, particularly concerning opening hours and days," notes Michel Engelz, secretary of the European Works Council. It has not been possible to get stores to close on Sunday or to reduce opening hours everywhere, as was possible in France". Another difference in treatment: Carrefour's management decided to use the measure adopted by the French government to grant a tax-exempt bonus exempt from social security contributions to French employees, but this has not been reproduced in other countries where this bonus is not part of the national measures implemented. Lastly, management is struggling to respond to the question of how

short-time working is applied in the different countries, with very different replacement rates, or whether or not leave is taken, whether or not it is forced. Here too, the diversity of national practices leads to inequalities that are difficult to resolve at group level.