

Workers Protest For EU Leaders To End Austerity

Raf Casert, Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Thousands of workers protested in Brussels on Thursday to demand that EU leaders gathering for a summit bring an end to austerity measures and instead focus on boosting growth and reducing unemployment.

The demonstration vented frustration over years of austerity imposed by EU leaders that unions and many economists say is worsening the recession and driving ever more people into unemployment and poverty.

Even the EU leaders acknowledge swift action is needed.

"We cannot turn a blind eye to the social emergency in some of our countries," EU President Herman Van Rompuy said as he sought to focus attention of the 27 EU leaders on youth employment. Most leaders, however, remain committed to reducing public debt quickly, primarily through spending cuts and raising taxes.

Unemployment across the 17 EU countries that use the euro rose to a record 11.9 percent during January, from 10.8 in the previous year. Youth unemployment is also continuing to rise unabated, peaking at 24.2 percent.

At the same time, several EU nations remain mired in recession, further limiting the scope of action.

"There is still a long way to go to restore our growth prospects, to revive our economies, to heal our banking systems, to create more jobs," Van Rompuy said.

The two-day EU spring summit, which will stretch into Friday, traditionally centers on the economy, and peaking unemployment has given it special urgency.

"No leader can be happy with the situation where 26 million people are out of work in the European Union. That is why we are here," said Ireland's Prime Minister Enda Kenny.

However, the leaders have not yet offered an alternative to the fundamentals of the austerity policies that have marked the response to the region's three-year-old debt crisis — even though some appear ready to temper some of the measures.

Protestors at Thursday's labor demonstration are calling for more than tweaks to the current measures, however.

"The policies that have been put in place have failed, we are in a double-dip recession. We see that the efforts have been put on the shoulders of workers," said Bernadette Segol, the general secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation.

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Europe's manufacturing industry has been hit by a succession of plant closures and job losses. At Thursday's demonstration, workers from the steel giant ArcelorMittal and Construction equipment maker Caterpillar protested recent moves by their companies to cut the size of their workforces.

And promoting flexibility in labor contracts and other industrial policies, Segol said, is increasing pressure on wages, "weakening social services and weakening social protection."

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