

ETUC resolution on trade union involvement in the EU Semester

Adopted at the Executive Committee Meeting of 14-15 December 2016

The European Semester is the annual cycle of economic policy guidance and surveillance for the economic governance of the EU. Member States coordinate their economic and social policies - in areas that often fall under their exclusive competence – within the Council and the Eurogroup. The intergovernmental dimension is dominant, as the decision-making power resides in the governments' hands.

The political direction for the Semester is set by Member States who have ratified integrated economic and employment policy guidelines in the context of the Europe 2020 strategy. The employment guidelines were reviewed and updated in 2015.

The European Commission exercises an important role in terms of analysis, reporting and policy designing to instruct the European Council and implement the EU Council's decisions. The Commission acts as a counterpart to the Member States which are subject to the corrective arm of the economic governance.

Within the Semester, the Economic Dialogue involves the European Parliament and national parliaments as stakeholders with a consultative role.

To date, many of the recommendations coming out of the Semester are detrimental to workers. Often, they focus on fiscal consolidation, the decentralisation of collective bargaining and the reform of the wage-setting system, and the reduction of employment protection legislation.

Reinforcing the social agenda of economic governance is still a difficult challenge for the trade union movement. As long as the current narrative remains unchanged, economic considerations will continue to prevail over the social dimension. The challenge for the trade union movement is therefore to change this through coordinated action to influence the European Semester.

Involvement of social partners in the Semester

Social dialogue can be a driving force for successful, sustainable and inclusive economic, employment and social policy-making. The [Quadripartite Statement](#) on a New Start for Social Dialogue establishes a framework for national and European social partners' involvement in the EU Semester.

To be credible, a revamped social dimension to economic governance requires that all decision-makers show the same commitment toward the social partners for a results-oriented dialogue. In this regard, several processes have been initiated within the framework of closer cooperation with the European Commission.

However, trade union positions should be coherently voiced before the key bodies and institutions that detain decision-making powers in the economic governance of the EU such as the European Council, especially through the Tripartite Social Summit, the EU Council through the consultation of social partners with the Employment Committee (EMCO) and Social Protection Committee (SPC) and the national governments, introducing requirements for trade union involvement, especially in the elaboration of

National Reform Programmes, Stability/Convergence Programmes and Country-Specific Recommendations.

A new method of work: the ETUC Toolkit Semester 2.0

Closer involvement of social partners in the EU Semester reduces the democratic gap of the economic governance of the EU. However, it requires a more uniform and coordinated approach to ensure that trade unions at national and European level have the most opportunities to exercise influence at each stage of the Semester process.

The ETUC Toolkit Semester 2.0 designs a new method of work for the ETUC and its affiliates. The annex to this resolution provides concrete tools aimed at optimizing the use of time and resources by the ETUC and its affiliated organisations, while respecting traditions and practices at national level.

One of the ETUC's priorities is to support national trade unions in the Semester, and to build a level playing field for a robust dialogue between national trade unions and their governments.

A group of Trade Union Semester Liaison Officers (TUSLO) has been set up with a view to increasing coordination between the ETUC and its affiliates, and to facilitate dialogue between national trade unions and other institutions.

Stronger coordination among trade unions is needed. Trade unions can be more influential if they convey their demands, that are determined at national level, within a common set of EU objectives, thus giving shape and voice to the common interests of all European workers.

To this end, the ETUC will publish a document in the month of September each year, entitled "ETUC for Growth and Social Progress: Priorities for the Annual Growth Survey (AGS)" (tool 1).

The ETUC supports its affiliates in terms of their exercising their influence on the drafting of Country Reports. In the month of December every year, the ETUC publishes the Report on Trade Union Inputs for Early-Stage Consultation on Country Reports. The report collects national inputs submitted by its affiliates (tool 2). In preparation for this, it is advisable for ETUC affiliates to develop their own country report from the month of October.

The ETUC's affiliates should be involved in the elaboration of National Reform Programmes and Stability/Convergence Programmes that their governments publish in the month of April to initiate a process that may potentially lead to the conclusion of an agreement. The ETUC's affiliates should also be involved in the drafting and implementation of Country-Specific Recommendations. All ETUC affiliates should submit requests to their governments to agree on stable and structured procedures to negotiate with them at the national milestones of the Semester. The ETUC will monitor trade union involvement at national level, will assist in disseminating best practices, and will see that all its affiliates are given the opportunity to be heard at national level (tool 3).

The ETUC will develop standards, templates and procedures to maximise the use of available resources, improve communication and exchange among its affiliates, and give visibility to trade union positions within the framework of the economic governance of the EU. It will promote training and seminars for capacity-building relating to trade union involvement in the EU Semester (tool 4).

Definition of trade union involvement in the EU Semester

It is time to transform declarations of principle into effective practices. For that to happen, the ETUC will advocate for a clear concept of trade union involvement that must be respected in the EU Semester.

This concept should be based on any form of *dialogue* with national and European decision-makers which *meaningfully, in a timely manner, with adequate capacities and at the appropriate level is conducive to* ETUC affiliates exercising influence in the designing and in the implementation of policies at the milestones of the European Semester and, if desired, in any other process related to the economic governance of the EU.

Dialogue is a process that consists of a two-way flow of information, involving at least the decision-maker and the trade unions, which has the potential to lead to the conclusion of an agreement. One-way communication or awareness raising practices are excluded from this concept.

It is of vital importance that the dialogue be:

- **Meaningful:** trade unions should have access to complete written information to deliver a fully-informed position.
- **At the appropriate level:** the dialogue should take place with those who are actually able to influence policy decisions. This can be at political level (*i.e.*, Ministries, Undersecretaries, etc.), but technical levels can also be useful and desirable to better prepare consultation with the appropriate political level.
- **Timely:** sufficient time should be made available to trade unions to elaborate on the position/intentions of the decision-maker and react according to their actual capacities, without altering or derogating from their internal democratic constraints.

Moreover, trade unions need to have the capacity, in terms of sufficient material, as well as financial and human resources, to autonomously elaborate positions and participate actively during consultations at the milestones of the EU Semester.

ETUC DEMANDS

On the basis of the above concept, the ETUC will advocate for the right of trade unions to be involved in the EU Semester by building on the transparency of the process, access to documents, useful timing and appropriateness of interlocutors, publishing of results, and on the accountability of decision-makers. Such rights should be embodied in the legislative framework of the EU Semester and become binding on both European and national decision-makers.

Looking at the current practices of trade union involvement, some practical arrangements can be immediately achieved to improve quality of dialogue at national and European level.

The ETUC requests that each Member State establish structured involvement processes, including, for instance, the appointment of a Liaison Officer with social partners as already done by the European Commission and by the ETUC's affiliated organisations.

National visits/missions by the European Commission should be based on a real dialogue with a mutual exchange of information. Trade unions must be consulted as social partners and the ETUC's affiliates, in line with the spirit of the Quadripartite Declaration, should be considered privileged interlocutors.

ETUC affiliates should have the same opportunities to voice their positions, orally and in writing, in their native language.

National Governments should regularly report, on an annual basis, on how they have involved social partners at the milestones of the Semester and on how they have taken social partners' views into account. Such reports should form the basis for an annual review to be performed within the framework of closer cooperation between EMCO, the European Commission and the European Social Partners.

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Annex: ETUC Toolkit