

Speech from Luca Visentini, General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation

The ETUC Manifesto

29 September - 02 October 2015, Paris

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Delegates, colleagues, friends,

First of all I would like to thank you sincerely for the support you have expressed for me, for the President, and for the Secretariat for the next 4 years.

We've got a great new team now, and I'm really happy with that.

We have succeeded in ensuring full gender equality, and all geographical areas of Europe are represented. We have brought in colleagues who are full of energy and enthusiasm, ready to deliver ETUC policy.

You can be sure that we will work as a united team, in strong coordination with our very competent staff, and with all of you, our affiliates.

We've also got a clear and sound Action Programme for the future, including the document outlining the role of the ETUC, and in few minutes we will also approve our Manifesto.

This is a very good basis and platform for facing the important and very difficult challenges we have in front of us.

And we are fully confident we will make it, thanks to the strength of unity and support you have shown during the debates in this Congress.

The ETUC is active, ready and able to fight for a different Europe for workers.

It won't be easy, we all know that.

We have come through one of the worst periods in European trade union history.

We have resisted attacks and actual wars, in the economy and in society. And all too often, workers and trade unions have been damaged.

The mission for the next term will be to continue to resist, but also to try to change the negative context in which we find ourselves, to restore our prerogatives and power, and to bring concrete results for our members.

Our first task is to overcome the crisis.

Europe is the only continent in the world continuing to face recession, deflation, or very little jobless growth in a few countries.

We know perfectly well that this is due to austerity, cuts, and the so-called neoliberal ideology.

And we also know that there cannot be quality employment and job creation, nor high levels of welfare and social protection, without boosting the economy and restoring sustainable growth.

Investment is the first pillar for growth.

The ETUC has launched its own plan for investment, but we also need to challenge the European Commission's proposal.

We need to negotiate and make sure that sufficient public resources will be available, and that they will go to the countries and sectors more in need, to sound industrial policies and good public services, to innovation and research, to education and training, to support human capital and job creation.

We need to negotiate at European level for that, but we need to do it at national level too. Countries should be allowed to invest, by loosening austerity rules and monitoring projects and spending.

Besides investment, we need internal demand.

Most European products go to European consumers. So, without increasing people's purchasing power we will continue to face deflation and recession.

The only way to increase internal demand is to increase wages and pensions, and the only way to get a pay rise in Europe is to strengthen industrial relations, collective bargaining structures, and get higher minimum wages.

Wage coordination and coordination of industrial relations have to be respected as the autonomous domain of trade unions, to strengthen their power and to be able to react to austerity and diktats by public authorities.

If we want to beat the crisis, fight against unemployment, restore the European social model, and get better working conditions for all, we need to prioritise the core business of trade unions, which is negotiation - negotiation - negotiation.

Our negotiating power is essential to bring concrete results for workers, to increase our membership and representativeness, and also to change the austerity narrative that has been mainstreamed so far, to become the single way-of-thinking of our era.

I repeated 'negotiation' three times not only for rhetorical emphasis. There are three kinds of negotiation in which we should engage.

Firstly, we need to negotiate to reinforce, restore, and in some countries even build up from zero, collective bargaining institutions and proper workers' participation - by the way we should also never forget that statutory minimum wages can only be strengthened if trade unions have the capacity to bargain for them.

Many unions need support to foster their negotiating capacity, and if requested the ETUC will be there to help.

Secondly, we need to negotiate to relaunch social dialogue, the traditional bipartite social dialogue first of all, at European, sectoral and national level.

To do that, we need to set up a new alliance with the most intelligent employers, who know that there is a direct link between well-developed and competitive economies, high levels of productivity, and strong and autonomous relations between social partners.

And finally, the third level of negotiation we have to set up relates to Economic Governance and the Semester process. You all know better than me that any European and national decisions, any kind of reform, are totally influenced and ruled by these processes.

The so-called European 'acquis' is no longer based on directives and legislation only; the prevalence of Member States' power in the Council led to a re-nationalisation of the European Union. The traditional tripartite dialogue between European institutions and social partners has been strongly affected, and the same has happened at national and sectoral level.

That's why we need to stand together to preserve and strengthen trade union prerogatives and capacity. If we don't fight to improve standards in the less developed countries, sooner or later they will be damaged even in the most developed ones.

You can see what is happening at the same time in the UK, in Finland, in Spain and in Greece: four completely different countries, with different economies and institutional frameworks, are experiencing very similar attacks on workers' and trade union rights.

The ETUC will stand beside our affiliates in these countries and any others where trade unions are under attack.

My insistence on the economy, wages, industrial relations and social dialogue doesn't mean that the new team of the ETUC will neglect all the other issues linked to employment, labour law, social protection and social rights; or that we will forget emerging priorities like migration, digitalisation, tax coordination, climate change or international trade.

If you look at our Manifesto, you can see how high on our agenda all these issues are. We have to fight to protect the European social model and to demonstrate with our good arguments that it is a factor for competitiveness, and not a burden or an obstacle to growth: also in this instance we have to push for a new and fairer narrative.

At the conclusion of our Congress, I really want to draw your attention to the main challenges we must tackle, if we want to relaunch the European trade union movement, and better help and protect our members.

First - our negotiating capacity, to set an autonomous trade union agenda and deliver concrete results; and second - our capacity to influence the new institutional decision-making process, in order to counter austerity and contribute to a fair and social Europe for all.

At the beginning of our Congress Mr. Juncker delivered a very interesting speech. It was the first time in 4 years of working at the ETUC that I have heard the President of the Commission speaking about national sectoral collective bargaining instead of decentralisation; about fighting against precariousness and setting permanent working contracts as the norm; about the need to ensure the same pay and conditions for the same work.

We have received contradictory messages from the Commission so far: on the one hand great announcements about relaunching social dialogue and investment, but on the other hand very poor implementation of initiatives, and sometimes unacceptable decisions, like the one on hairdressing.

The first thing I will do on Monday will be to send Mr Juncker a request for a meeting, to see if he's really willing and able to transform his declarations to our Congress into reality. Now it's time for action, we need to bring concrete results to workers.

We cannot fail to meet these challenges if we want the trade union movement to survive and grow. But it means that we also need to rethink and renew the ETUC and European trade unionism.

Less bureaucracy and more solidarity and cooperation; a more progressive agenda and on-the-offensive initiatives; clearer and stronger messages; more democracy and transparency; more attention to youth, women, precarious workers, elderly people, and all the categories of society neglected in recent years: these are the foundations of a renewed ETUC.

And they are valid for the whole trade union movement.

We, the new team, the ETUC staff, are committed to making them a reality. But we cannot do it alone; we need your help, your contribution, your support.

We have to stand together to win. And this should be a mutual commitment. Deeper exchange and cooperation between the ETUC and its affiliates are fundamental to achieving our common objectives.

I'm sure that we will be able to involve you more and more; and you will be willing to participate more and more.

I'm fully confident, because the enthusiasm I've felt in the last months, going around to visit almost all our countries, has been really strong.

I want to thank all of you: the affiliates, the national confederations, the European federations, all the colleagues participating in our committees and working groups, EUROCADRES, the FERPA, the ETUI. You are the ETUC.

I want to thank all our staff colleagues, who are always so helpful and supportive in our daily work.

I want to thank the colleagues of the new team, with whom we have already built an extraordinary cooperation that promises so well for the future.

And last but not least, I want to thank Bernadette, Ignacio, Patrick, Josef, Veronica, Claudia, Judith and Tom, for these years we have worked together; difficult but really exciting years that made me understand what social Europe should be.

Some of you will stay, some will leave, some have already left, but all of us will continue to be part of the ETUC family.

We very rarely consider it, but the ETUC is the biggest social movement in Europe. We are very proud of it. And we will continue to fight for it.

Another and better Europe is possible, and the trade union movement will contribute to it.

All together we can win.

Thank you very much.

VOTE ON THE MANIFESTO

SPECIAL THANKS TO BERNADETTE

Before giving the floor to our new President, Rudy Deleeuw, I would like once more to thank Bernadette for what she did for the ETUC in the last 4 years.

They were very difficult years, as I already said: probably the most challenging in the whole ETUC history.

And Bernadette was able to resist and to defend the ETUC and the European trade union movement from ferocious attacks.

She was also able to keep our organisation united and to carry this heavy responsibility through to the very end of her mandate, until this Congress.

I would really like to thank you Bernadette for having delivered to me and the new team a healthy ETUC, in unity and solidarity.

Please come to the podium, the ETUC has a present for you.