

Speech given by Bernadette Ségol, General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)

UGT-P 35th anniversary
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Caras e Caros Colegas,

Em nome da Confederação europeia de sindicatos (CES) , eu gostaria de dizer aqui uma palavrinha em português, para agradecer a UGT assim que o seu Secretario geral e amigo Carlos Silva, por me ter convidado a comerorar, convosco os 35 anos da UGT.

I like to introduce the European Trade Union Confederation as the European Trade Union because this designation immediately shows what we are, what we do and for whom, and why we do it.

What brings us together from Finland to Portugal, from Hungary to Ireland is the defence of workers' rights, the defence of the European social model made up of industrial relations, social protection and good public services.

What brings us together is the firm belief that European countries must build their future together.

What brings us together is our will to oppose the ideology of neo-liberalism and to influence decisions affecting us and future generation.

Yes, historically, the ETUC has always been in favour of the European Union, but not just any European Union.

We are indeed for “another Europe”, for a Social Europe. But what does that mean?

Social Europe is a Europe which is not just a free market. It is not David Cameron's Europe; it is not the Europe of the Troika.

Social Europe is a Europe with common binding standards.

In a social Europe, social protection, minimum wages, social dialogue, collective bargaining and social legislation are not considered obstacles for the economy or for competitiveness, but indeed quite the opposite. Because indeed good wages, decent jobs, social dialogue, collective bargaining, social legislation are essential to social progress and social progress should be the aim of a good functioning economy.

We got a taste of that Europe when we won the right to equality at work, especially equal pay for men and women, when we got legislation on health and safety, when we secured legislation making workers' information and consultation mandatory, when European Works Councils were created, when an employment chapter was included in the Treaties, when we negotiated a legislative framework for part-time work, for fixed-term contracts and parental leave.

That was before the neo-liberal wave permeated every pore of society.

This touch of Social Europe came before casino capitalism plunged us into a serious economic situation from which the financial sector is about to safely emerge unscathed, whereas workers and ordinary people have had to shoulder most of the burden of the crisis.

The ETUC stands for social justice. Making ordinary people suffer the consequences of the financial sector's folly is unjustifiable. And yet it is the line adopted by the EU heads of state and governments supporting the policy of the troika.

ETUC should propose a common trade union growth plan during the next Executive Committee.

For many EU leaders, the current crisis was a good excuse to strengthen the power of neo-liberal ideology.

President - Friends,

We want to change the tide, we need to go from austerity to sustainable growth and jobs.

This is why, today, our first priority for Social Europe is a major economic recovery plan, which is the only way to boost growth and quality employment.

Such a plan requires an innovative use of institutions. It requires a well-understood economic solidarity between European countries. And to achieve this, we need a long-term vision but that vision of what the EU should be. Unfortunately, that vision is desperately lacking.

Our plan will be a European trade union plan encompassing proposals on the table like the DGB proposal but also the Nordic or the Italian proposal but such a plan can only work if Europe gives up its blind veneration of the 3% deficit.

President - Friends,

Yes, public finances must be sound and debt levels must be lowered. But blindly slashing expenditure and wages as was notably imposed on the Greeks and the Spanish, the Portuguese and the Irish is counterproductive. The best way is to re-launch growth and to tackle the deficit and debt over a much longer period of time.

In December 2012, the heads of state and government – promised a roadmap for the social dimension of the euro area by June 2013.

The European Trade Union Confederation was waiting with anticipation for the Commission Communication and for the Council reaction to it. It came recently.

We have been profoundly disappointed, even angry at the result of the last EU summit. We got words, but no real action on the social dimension of the EMU.

We got empty words on social Europe but strong words for deregulation. The social dimension run the risk to be reduced to a scoreboard, to statistical information.

Friends - the EU economic programme - what is called the semester - must be reoriented. Increased poverty and inequalities are not acceptable.

ETUC will be involved in the process but you in Portugal must also be involved.

We did not win much but we won this! The obligation to involve us - ETUC at EU level in Portugal, trade unions, in the elaboration of recommendations for national programmes. We should play our full part in this process.

President - Friends - we are in heavy waters, in stormy weather. We are in favour of another Europe. But how do we get to that other Europe? Which forces can get us there?

The challenge in front of us is to change the EU, not by destroying it but by acting together for a new EU model.

We have won the institutional recognition of European trade unionism. It is engraved in the Treaties which is something many other regional entities in the world envy.

We are under stress, under pressure, at national and European level. But friends, as a trade union, we are used to living under tension/pressure. This is normal trade union life. Trade union must combine refusal and opposition on the one hand, negotiation to find better solutions on the other.

You are well aware of this in Portugal.

This tension is part of the nature of trade union.

In Europe as in Portugal, our role is to resist - to propose - to negotiate, using all means at our disposal. And resist: we did and we do. The European Trade Union said "no" to the possibly fiscal compact. We say "no" to President Barroso and Commissioner Olli Rehn who are doing their utmost to restrict Europe to being a neo-liberal area in which citizens are forced to compete for the least demanding social standards. We say "no" to the actions of the Troika in programme countries. We say "no" to those who believe that social progress goes against economic success and competitiveness. We say no to those who put the burden on the weakest in society. This is not social justice. ETUC says no.

We call for a new European social programme; we call for a directive on restructuring and for a health and safety programme. We call for a social progress protocol and for a European industrial policy. We call for the implementation of a youth guarantee, particularly in the countries which need it most. We are denied all this in the name of economic liberalism. We do not yet have the majorities or alliances required to change that hopeless lack of social progress but we will not stop denouncing this situation. Friends, we will go on saying that European integration is possible only if it generates social progress.

But solely opposing the European Union would be counterproductive.

In a globalised world, we need to closely cooperate and better integrate our economies and social systems. If we do not do it, workers, citizens and future generations would definitely be on the losing side.

The ETUC is not calling for the Euro's disappearance and the rebuilding of national borders. Consequences for workers would be dramatic.

We say "yes" to what still is the objective of the European Union: social progress and full employment. Let us not forget that that objective appears under Article 3 of the current Treaty.

In less than a year, a new European Parliament will be elected. This election is important. If we want to have a chance to see "another Europe" emerging, we need to mobilise workers ahead of this election we need a European Parliament which supports our positions. Last week, the ETUC has adopted its platform in view of these elections.

We should all use this manifesto and encourage workers to vote for candidates friendly to our views. I am convinced that UGT-P will work in that direction.

To achieve that other Europe, the ETUC uses, and will continue to use, all means at its disposal: demonstrations, lobbying, campaigns, social networks and negotiations, naturally including alliances and cooperation with all progressive forces in Society.

And friends, we will continue to fight, to bring workers and citizens' voices in all places - particularly places where decisions are made.

This is what ETUD did since its creation. This is what UGT-P did for the last 35 years.

We are, you are fully alive for future fights.

Par terminar em português, desejo-vos uma boa continuação do vosso trabalho, boa sorte e força para o futuro de forma a não abandonar o combate frente aos grandes desafios que a UGT terá pela sua frente, mais uma vez em nome da CES, coragem e força à UGT e a todos os trabalhadores portugueses, Obrigados