

Tripartite Social Summit

24th March 2021

Speech of Luca Visentini, ETUC General Secretary

Presidents,
Prime Minister,
Vice President,
Commissioner,
Ministers,
Colleagues from the social partners.

Despite all our efforts, the pandemic is still rampant, and we are not yet seeing the light at the end of the tunnel.

We appreciate the actions taken by the European Commission and Member States, but a lot remains to be done to make sure that vaccines reach most of the population in a reasonably short time, under fair conditions of access, and free of charge.

For this purpose, the ETUC advocates for patents on vaccines to be waved and TRIPS (Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) agreement to be derogated at WTO level. We ask the Commission and Member States to be proactive in this respect.

Our economy and labour market are living in limbo. We see relatively low levels of unemployment and bankruptcies because emergency measures have protected hundreds of thousands of businesses and tens of millions of workers, but the situation is very soon going to dramatically explode. Be not mistaken, despite the emergency measures, we already see an unprecedented rise in inequality and precarity, since these measures have not reached all workers.

The recovery funds will start being disbursed at the end of the year, and they will take 1 to 2 years to have an impact. Therefore, it is urgent to prolong the emergency measures for employment and the economy, otherwise we will face a disaster. There is also the need to fill existing gaps in the coverage of the emergency measures, by extending and increasing the support for SMEs, self-employed, and non-standard and precarious workers.

ETUC is particularly worried that Member States did not use a significant part of the resources allocated for emergency measures, particularly SURE, and are not planning to use the loans allowed by the RRF, because they are afraid to generate excessive public debt.

In order to address these issues, the own resources of the EU have to be significantly increased through a reform of the European taxation policy and the introduction of new taxation tools, such as the FTT and environmental taxes. This is the only way to make the EU debt sustainable in the long run.

In this respect, we welcome the Commission's Communication on the prolongation of the General Escape Clause until the end of 2022, hence derogating Member States from their fiscal targets in order to support the emergency measures and investment.

At the same time, we request that the discussion on the review of the Stability and Growth Pact and the EU economic governance start immediately. In this manner it can be concluded by the end of the year and we could have more sustainable rules about public deficit and debt.

This must go hand in hand with a strong and ambitious EU industrial policy, and with a broader reflection on how to build a more sustainable and inclusive economic model. We need to go beyond GDP-only related indicators, towards an approach based on wellbeing and a just transition to a green and digital recovery. We, as European social partners, will soon be ready to present some joint proposals in this respect.

Such discussions shall be part of the debate in the Conference on the Future of Europe and the Porto Social Summit endorsing the Action Plan implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights – two fundamental processes where social partners need to have an active role.

In particular, we welcomed the Action Plan published by the Commission and we are ready to contribute to its implementation. At the Social Summit in Porto we expect an ambitious joint declaration to be agreed upon by all institutions, including each Prime Minister and Head of State, with a clear commitment to deliver on targets and actions to relaunch and strengthen the European Social Model.

This will require massive investments for quality job creation and active labour market policies. Investments for reskilling and upskilling, for universal and adequate social protection systems. Also increases in wages and the redistribution of wealth. It is in this way that we will increase productivity, not through cuts or further austerity.

The social dimension must go together with the economic dimension and be embedded in the recovery strategy. Next Generation EU and the national Recovery and Resilience Plans have to be designed and implemented with full involvement of social partners.

We strongly appeal to all of you to fill the gaps that still exist at national level, where too often social partners are not involved, or consulted very poorly and just formally; while social dialogue, collective bargaining and workplace democracy are neglected. This situation must be urgently addressed, it is no longer the time for lip service, we need action.

Together with the Action Plan for the Pillar, on 3-4 March the European Commission has published a series of important initiatives, such as the “Recommendation on Effective Active Support to Employment (EASE)”, the “Communication One year since the outbreak of COVID-19: fiscal policy response”, the proposal for a “Directive on Gender Pay Transparency”, and the “Strategy for the rights of persons with disabilities 2021-2030”.

We fully support these initiatives. We also welcome the social partners consultation on Platform Work, the public consultation on Ageing, and the several initiatives for the implementation of the Green Deal and the environmental strategy of the EU.

We expect the Commission to very soon come forward with further consultations and proposals, including on the right to disconnect, public procurement, due diligence and responsible business conduct, and minimum income. Also, with an assessment of the functioning and implementation of SURE, as a basis for a more permanent mechanism for protection of employment and fight against unemployment.

Such legislative and policy initiatives are essential tools to achieve the targets set out in the Action Plan for the Pillar. They need to be included in the new Scoreboard for a more sustainable and inclusive Economic and Social Governance.

Finally, we welcome the Council’s legal service’s opinion, confirming the full legitimacy of the proposed Minimum Wages Directive. It is now time to give a strong push to accelerate the legislative process, we expect that all the institutions and actors involved will play a positive role in removing obstacles and resolving possible problems. We need to swiftly deliver this piece of legislation, which is essential to achieve wage and social justice in the EU and beyond.