

**Speech given by Rudy De Leeuw, President of the ETUC and FGTB,
at the ETUC Mid-Term Conference on 29-31 May 2017 in Rome, Italy**

“Towards a Workers Europe and Sustainable Jobs for All”

Dear friends,
Comrades,
Buongiorno a tutte e tutti !

Welcome to this mid-term conference, which is intended to help us to get our heads up, look back over the road we have travelled, and to consolidate our positions in order to reach the goals we have set ourselves.

I would like to thank our Italian friends for hosting us here in Rome. It is not the first time, and it is definitely becoming a good habit. Rome is a whole facet of the culture to which all of us here belong as Europeans. And there cannot be genuine democracy without culture.

Democracy, deepening democracy as well as that of decision-making processes incorporating participation by the people, is certainly one of the major issues for the weeks, months and years ahead.

As we have reached a crossroads, we have a duty not to disappoint the workers, who have great expectations of Europe.

I take this opportunity to welcome the decision by the European Court of Justice which has ruled that the trade agreements negotiated with the European Union will need to be ratified by national and regional parliaments to be able to enter into force.

Never again should a Treaty be discussed in secret, without transparency and remote from democracy.

I strongly believe that the creation of a strong Europe, which necessarily means a social Europe, requires workers and citizens to be taken into account to a greater extent. Here, I am thinking of all citizens, including those who leave their country to seek a better future in Europe.

In this regard, we will continue to remain very vigilant in relation to the policy pursued by the European institutions. I am thinking in particular about the unbearable agreement with Turkey; but let's be honest: it is also high time for every Member State to take a good look at itself, and some need to do that more than others ...

Democracy will also be a topic in our work here, because you will be adopting a position on the representation of women in our Congress, which is still not equal, which as democrats we need to put right, no?

The survival of democracy was also at the heart of the debate and the recent presidential election in France. Ultimately, democracy was the winner, but we are not immune from far right policies, which threaten the world of work.

When workers do not receive what they are entitled to because they are having austerity imposed on them, social inequalities increase and it does happen that some of them are won over by populist politicians.

However, these populists who want to be elected to bring about solutions to the crises that we are experiencing also mostly defend the socio-economic programmes of austerity that have already got us nowhere.

As we know, the best curb on extreme and/or populist tendencies would be a real, sustainable economy, which benefits everyone.

Dear friends,

Today, Europe remains fragile

- because it is unable to show the benefits that it represents in practical terms for workers;
- it also remains the Europe of multinationals and the rich;
- because, although it has come up with a “European pillar of social rights”, it has not yet incorporated that sufficiently into a broader, coherent political project, where basic rights, decent jobs and social protection take priority over economic policies.

However, I repeat that Europe is part of the solution, not of the problem, on condition that it puts women and men - those in work or out of a job - back at the heart of its political project.

A project that offers a response to the social, economic as well as environmental concerns of our societies. Because there will be no jobs on a dead planet.

So what does the future hold for Europe? Are we bound to see a two-speed Europe? Should there be a parliamentary assembly for the euro zone? A large number of questions are being asked in the European public debate.

As far as we are concerned, we want to seize all the opportunities available to us for improving the situation of workers, and we will be in favour of any course of action that puts workers at the centre of the European social policy project.

So in my opinion, it is urgent to ensure that:

- social dumping is brought to an end;
- “free trade” is no longer a social and tax race to the bottom; to become fair trade.
- rules about government deficits no longer take precedence over the real economy;
- austerity for workers comes to a definitive end, which is why our Pay Rise campaign is demanding:
 - pay rises;
 - pay convergence upward between East and West, between countries and between companies;
 - collective bargaining agreements cover European workers as broadly as possible.

It is also high time for:

- a euro zone budget, that manages corporation taxes;
- making sustainable development goals into a social opportunity;
- taxing returns on capital rather than taxing income from work;
- removing public investments from deficits, especially if they contribute to implementing the Paris Climate Agreement;
- the European Central Bank to play its role of lender of last resort and participate in financing the public debt (via a reduced rate)
- a fair BREXIT to be negotiated; but any worker, must not be left out in the cold, nor in U.K. , neither in Europe.

We will be devoting these two days of work to a major concern, i.e. our priority job as the European Trade Union Confederation: contributing to creating and keeping jobs. I would like to add sharing them too by reducing working time. I hope that will happen one day.

I am talking about jobs

- that protect workers' health and their environment;
- Quality jobs that comply with the standards of the International Labour Organisation and a real European pillar of social rights;
- jobs that are a safeguard against poverty and social inequalities, which continue to increase, which is not acceptable!

The challenges raised by climate change, the energy transition, the circular economy, digital technologies, the 'sharing' economy, must be taken up via a fair transition strategy to support change, making sure that workers are not abandoned.

Rather than multinationals that are always whining about a need to cut their taxes and social security contributions, at the same time as privatising profits while passing on losses to society as a whole, we need entrepreneurs who are bold, innovative and who create quality jobs.

That is why we need, as a priority, to support businesses which are committed and bank on the development of a sustainable industry capable of making high value-added finished products and services.

Businesses that guarantee quality jobs, and which play the game of fair taxation, decent wages, social dialogue and optimum social protection for all workers.

Besides expectations of the private sector, the Juncker Plan, even if it is increased, with 500 billion by 2020, is well short of what is necessary to revitalise the European economy! ETUC wants a real boost and calls for a plan that is worthy of the name, with an additional investment target of 250 billion per year for ten years (=2% of European GDP).

ETUC would like to invest primarily in public services, for example, in education and health, in mobility, in housing.

Quality jobs are also well-paid jobs, which can drive our economies, both national and European.

We believe that pay rises also mean more equal pay.

So, it is essential to put an end, once and for all, to the wage dumping which puts everyone in competition with each other: countries, regions, companies and workers.

The situation we are experiencing today in this regard is totally unacceptable, and the pay gap between women and men is totally unacceptable too!

Moreover, the fight for decent minimum wages must continue, wherever unions are in favour of it.

Drawing on the model adopted by Belgian unions, I take this opportunity to argue in favour of automatic index-linking of wages to inflation, wherever possible.

And finally, we aspire to an enhanced social security system at every level: decent unemployment benefits and decent pensions, affordable, high-quality health care.

On a broader front, we want to improve the quality of life of workers and our trade union concerns go well beyond 'purchasing power' to acquire consumer goods.

Dear friends,

Now, to finish on a matter of "popular" culture and legend, and I hope our Italian friends will agree with me: please don't forget to toss a coin in the Trevi Fountain to make sure that you come back to Rome.

(I never do it, to afford my next trip to Rome)

I wish us highly successful work and conclusions which will fan the fire of social and trade union ardour in the interest of Europe's workers.

Let us always remember: through ETUC, we represent 45 million European workers. We are a countervailing power to be reckoned with, and we must continue to make sure we are respected.

The Europe that we are calling for cannot be built without the workers.

Together we are stronger: long live the ETUC!