

ETUC Statement for International Women's Day 2013: Women are paying too high a price! Europe must break with austerity and deliver on equality

On 8 March 2013, International Women's Day (IWD), women worldwide will unite in solidarity to celebrate their courage, determination, and strength and to repeat their collective demand for a basic yet fundamental right: equality between women and men. The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) celebrates with them and salutes the contributions and achievements, large and small, of the millions of trade union women and men who are constantly striving for women's rights in and out of the workplace.

IWD provides an occasion to assess the progress made towards achieving equality between women and men and to reflect on the current situation of women in society. Whilst the ETUC celebrates past progress, we also wish to highlight our increasing alarm at the impact of the crisis on gender equality and women's rights. Women are paying too high a price for austerity. The European trade union movement takes the occasion of IWD 2013 to call on the European Union and its Member States to urgently address the gender dimension of the crisis and to deliver on concrete measures to secure gender equality.

Europe is in the midst of a social crisis, characterised by record unemployment, spiralling poverty and rising insecurity affecting both men and women across the EU. There is growing evidence, however, that the crisis is having a disproportionate impact on women who were already disadvantaged on the labour market and at greater risk of poverty and social exclusion.

The situation is made worse by the harsh austerity and accelerated fiscal consolidation policies, focused particularly on radical restructuring of public sector jobs and services, which a majority of EU countries are slavishly implementing encouraged by the European Commission. This short-sighted approach has been implemented with scant or no regard for the impact they are likely to have on women who are predominantly employed in the public sector and rely disproportionately on public services. Cuts to public budgets and services, including health care, education, child and other dependent care, transport, housing, welfare, social protection, advice centres and equality bodies directly affect women and their ability to engage in the labour market and their economic independence, as well as contribute to gender inequalities.

The ETUC is extremely concerned that the economic policies that are being pursued will not only jeopardise future progress towards gender equality, but also risk reversing the hard won advances that have already been made in the workplace, the home and all spheres of women's lives. Trade unions and women's groups have been raising these concerns for some time, however, to date, the European Union and national governments have failed to give the issue the attention it deserves.

To draw attention to the matter and gain a better understanding of the situation, this year's ETUC 8 March Survey returns to the impact of the economic and employment crisis, as well as national and European policy responses, on women's participation in the labour market. Initial findings from the survey¹ show that 86% of the ETUC's affiliates that responded agreed that the economic and employment crisis was impacting on women's participation in the labour market and on their employment conditions. Members highlighted: an increase in the precariousness of female employment; a decrease in female employment, particularly in the public sector, and/or increased

¹ The full results of the 8 March Survey 2013 will be published later in March

unemployment; deteriorating working and contractual conditions with women increasingly forced to accept atypical and involuntary part-time work; lower wages; labour law reforms to the detriment of all workers, but particularly women and young people; increased stress and pressure at work; and greater difficulties in reconciling work and family responsibilities as well as women withdrawing from the labour market due to cuts in public services or entitlements.

We are well versed in the causes and results of gender inequality. Women are over-represented in part-time and temporary work, in low-paid and poor quality jobs. They are more likely to be in precarious employment or work in the informal economy, unprotected by employment law or social security safety nets. They are under-represented in decision-making positions in the workplace, in politics and in economic policy-making. Despite more than fifty years of legislation assuring equal pay, the gender pay gap persists fuelled by discrimination, labour market segregation and the baby penalty. Women continue to carry most of the responsibility for caring for children and other dependents, as well as the lioness's share of domestic chores. These disadvantages impact on women throughout the course of their lives and are ultimately reflected in female pensioner poverty. Far too many women continue to live in fear of violence and worryingly, the social effects of the crisis are leading to an increase in domestic violence.

On IWD 2013, we, the ETUC, repeat our calls for Europe's political leaders, governments and the European institutions to take the following concrete action:

- urgently carry out gender impact assessments of the policies being pursued in response to the crisis;
- a moratorium on austerity and a halt to public sector pay freezes, cuts and reform without proper and effective social dialogue;
- recognize and promote the vital contribution that collective bargaining can play in tackling gender inequality, including the gender pay gap;
- a revision of the equal pay directives in consultation with the European social partners;
- ensure decent state pensions which maintain a proper standard of living in retirement;
- adoption of the revised Pregnant Workers' Directive;
- present proposals for an EU-wide right to paternity leave and a carers' leave directive;
- ratification of the ILO Convention on Domestic Workers; and
- ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence and the adoption of a European legislative framework on this basis.

The ETUC looks forward to a time when women have achieved equality of treatment in all spheres, economically, politically and socially and we can use International Women's Day just to celebrate women full stop. The European trade union movement will continue our efforts to achieve this aim, with, we hope, the full support of our social partners and the European governments and institutions.