



European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)
Confédération européenne des syndicats (CES)

Intervention by:

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Climate change and the effects on workers

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To be checked against delivery

I am very pleased to be able to address this important conference which is held very much on the initiative of the Spanish trade union movement. It shows the determination of the CC.OO and UGT-E to be in the vanguard of those who want to put climate change and sustainable development at the heart of European and Spanish strategy in the years ahead.

Some important sources still deny climate change. These include certain oil companies, the current United States President and his administration, and Sarah Palin, the Governor of Alaska, and now candidate for the Vice Presidency. Her only comment so far has been to advocate more drilling for oil and gas in Arctic waters.

But the science is undisputable. Climate change is in part at least man-made. We are heating up the atmosphere with our CO₂ emissions. Once upon a time, a recent time actually, industrial development was confined to Western Europe and North America. Now, many more countries have joined the industrial nations and they are entitled to their share of world resources (and to share, too, the responsibilities to the environment). China adds each year capacity for generating electricity equal to the combined output of France and the UK. The rising price of oil and other raw materials illustrates the stark increase in demand.

Meanwhile, if nothing is done, the Arctic icecap continues to recede, Spain could become more desert-like, and sea levels will rise, flooding low-lying coastal areas.

These problems cannot be tackled by making people poorer. Back to the future is not an option. The next generation hopes to be better off than the previous one just as we are better off than our parents and grandparents. We have a responsibility to the future and every year we delay crucial decisions, the eventual cost rises.

There is no one answer to the problem but many. At one level, technology must step up to the challenge. We need cleaner engines for vehicles and aircraft; we need sustainable energy systems including clean coal and safe nuclear power; and we need sustainable transport systems. These are all major questions for companies, governments and trade unions.

We also need intelligent conservation of the world's resources like fish and the tropical rainforest.

The European Union has laid down some ambitious targets – a 20% reduction by 2020. This is a huge challenge, especially if economic growth is to advance in the future as it has in the recent past. Spain, whose rise has been spectacular, does not want the good times to stop rolling.

So what can we do? Firstly, we must lead Europe and Spain to launch a concerted programme of investment in relevant new technologies. This will involve a major re-orientation of resources, and an end to the waste of these resources such as we have seen from financial speculators recently – an excess of speculation which has done so much to trigger the real prospect of recession.

We must make hard choice on issues like nuclear power. And we must protect European industry. We are not protectionist in trade but protectionist of the environment. There is no point in the tough targets if our companies produce in low standard territories and import the goods into the EU. That does nothing for the environment. So a carbon levy on imports from sources with lower standards than the EU should become the norm.

At the level of the company, unions should, through social dialogue, be pressing a green agenda, pressing for investment in new technology, pressing for new, less wasteful products, pressing for recycling, and pressing for respect for the environment. This will involve big decisions and many small ones.

I wish Aragon and Spain well with their ambition to become leaders on this vital question. I encourage the unions to follow up this conference by going further and faster with the green agenda. This has been a good start. Now let us build on it for a better future.