



TOGETHER FOR A FAIR DEAL FOR WORKERS

La Hulpe, 16 April 2024

High-Level Conference on the European Pillar of Social Rights

Intervention of Esther Lynch, ETUC General Secretary

La Hulpe : A project of hope

[Check against delivery]

Dear Presidents,

Dear Deputy Prime Ministers,

Dear Commissioner,

I will begin by formally announcing that **the European Trade Union Confederation will sign the La Hulpe Declaration on the Future of the European Pillar of Social Rights.**

This is what social partnership requires.

Negotiation, compromise, agreement.

I would like to **thank the Belgian Presidency, Deputy Prime Minister Dermagne and Deputy Prime Minister Vandenbroucke and their teams**, for leading us to this important milestone.

Thanks to your efforts, we have today an important Declaration that will support us in keeping social progress at the core of the agenda of the European institutions for the next term.

Dear Presidents,

When you think about great Europeans, who comes to mind?



Jacques Delors for sure, and his idea of social dialogue as a key pillar of European democracy,
other important fathers and mothers of Europe,

But there are other **great Europeans, other heroes, those women and men who work hard to provide for their families**. I want to mention a few examples of those Europeans, who brought their messages to the ETUC Congress in Berlin last year:

- Nancy, a cleaning worker, that struggles to make ends meet in the cost-of-living crisis
- Lucica, a pensioner, that has a pension of 350 Euros a month after 37 years of work and struggles to pay the rent, her health costs and put food on the table
- Ernest, a bus driver, who barely has the time to take a break because of the work pressure and the stress
- Marja, a young worker, who juggle between precarious jobs and unpaid traineeships
- Jesus, an unemployed worker, who was made redundant and was looking for access to training and a pathway to a quality job.

It is for them that we are here today,

to renew our commitment to build a fairer society, to social justice,
to make their lives easier, better,
to improve the lives of working people across Europe.

It is for them that we have to deliver.

And today working people in Europe are facing a **social justice emergency**.

In spite of advances delivered in this term, increasingly, insecurity and precariousness are everyday realities for working people.



There are more than 13 million workers unemployed. In 2022 the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion had increased by 3 million compared to 2019 and reached 95,3 million people, many of these are working hard but wages are still too low. Over 10% of workers in Europe are at risk of poverty. For children in poverty there has been an increase to 20 million (+ 2 million compared to 2019).

There must be a fundamental change. The benefits of the single market have not been shared equally, the wealthiest have seen their income increase while those on low and middle incomes have seen their real pay decrease. At the same time, new business models threaten employment rights and increase the imbalance of power away from workers and their trade unions.

The purpose of the social market economy must be to provide quality jobs, the improvement of living and working conditions, a future you can believe in – for you, your family and your community.

We must set the compass for the next institutional term towards a Europe that delivers for working people in practice. A Europe that truly supports workers to have a say in their workplace, through collective bargaining and social dialogue, workplace democracy. A Europe based on a fair days pay for a fair days work, based on employment security, on respect and equality for all workers regardless of what work that they do, where they are from or who they love.

It is for these reasons that the La Hulpe Declaration and the commitment to the full implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights we confirm today is so important.

Our La Hulpe commitment to a “*social Europe, with the aim of creating social and economic progress, ensuring equal opportunities for all, quality jobs and fair working conditions, reducing poverty and inequalities and fostering a just and fair transition to climate-neutrality*” carries the aspiration Europe needs.



It must be recognised and included also in the EU Strategic Agenda and put at the core of the work of the EU for the next years.

Europe must remain on the path of progress and solidarity we saw in its response to the Covid-19 crisis, and support working people and their communities across the continent.

Let's take pride in **our social model**. It is within the EU that we find some of the most cohesive, happy and productive societies. Those countries that perform the best on human development do so thanks to the strength of their **social dialogue and collective bargaining** systems, and they are also the most competitive.

These are pillars of our democracy.

Building upon the Val Duchesse pact, the La Hulpe Declaration importantly reaffirms *“the indispensable nature of effective social dialogue at the European Union level, as a fundamental component of the European social model and of our European democracy”*.

The reinforcement of European cross-industry and sectoral social dialogue and the continued support for the social partners and their agreements is an element of great importance in this context.

The first attacks on democracy are often attacks against workers and their trade union rights, in particular the right to strike.

For this reason, the Declaration's recognition of the importance of the right to collective bargaining and action, the freedom of association and assembly, as well as the need to respect the prerogatives of trade unions and to act against union busting.

Union busting must be made a crime.

The Declaration further recognises the key role of collective bargaining, including in anticipating and managing change, and the provisions of the Minimum Wage Directive



to promote collective bargaining and to increase its coverage. I would like to thank again Commissioner Schmit for his leadership. It is key to make sure the Directive is fully implemented and that EU institutions continue to promote collective bargaining.

Solving the lack of ‘quality jobs’ needs to be a central theme of the upcoming mandate.

The EU must stop the advance of precarious work by guaranteeing legal rights to permanent contracts and full-time work, and a ban on unpaid internships.

We also urgently need legislation to protect teleworkers’ rights, the right to disconnect, and to ban invasive and disrespectful surveillance. Artificial intelligence must be effectively regulated, with the ‘human in control’ principle incorporated into EU law.

And just transition will not happen by accident and it cannot be left to the market alone. We need to guarantee social dialogue and collective bargaining to anticipate and manage change.

Also, Europe must equip the workforce that powers it with the skills we need by ensuring the right for all to lifelong training without cost to the worker and during working time.

We must also say clearly: there can be no blank checks.

Public contract and public money must contribute to social progress and promote collective bargaining and quality jobs. That’s why we need social conditionalities and a revision of the Directives on Public Procurement.

We need a project of hope that delivers security and safety to workers, improved pay and working conditions, improved living conditions.

And the La Hulpe Declaration highlights several areas where legislative action in the next term will be necessary to ensure social progress.



We cannot fall into the trap of a backwards looking approach that focuses on deregulation. Considering competition as uniquely based on costs of companies is a failed approach that ignores the essential role played by quality public services, housing, childcare, transport in creating a high added value, genuinely competitive economy.

We need a regulatory environment that protects workers and guarantees a level-playing field.

We must do better for Europe: we cannot go back, we must go forward.

The elephant in the room is the real risk of austerity arising from the new economic governance rules.

Even the European Investment Bank states that *“Pulling back on public investment would be bad news for competitiveness, given the positive effect public investment has on private investment, including in digital technology and climate action”*.

The La Hulpe Declaration stresses the important lesson that we can take from the SURE instrument.

It is of paramount importance that the EU

- guard against reforms built on austerity that do not guarantee investment, public services, infrastructure, housing, transport, childcare, which are all required to achieve fair green and digital transitions and are essential ingredients of the European Industrial Strategy
- develops a permanent investment instrument to ensure the necessary investments for the digital and climate transitions and for social progress in all states and regions.

Dear Presidents,

It is of paramount importance to advance towards the full implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, as a guiding compass for the coming 5 years.



This must be our vision, **embedded throughout the EU Strategic Agenda.**

Our work together must not be an add on, but a core part of how the EU functions.

Roosevelt said that *“the test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little”*.

Today too many people in Europe have still too little. Too many workers are still at risk of poverty. We must address this social justice emergency.

We must lead with ambition: to treasure, defend and reinforce Social Europe in the next years!

This is the path to defending and reinforcing democracy in Europe.

This is the path we reaffirm today with the La Hulpe Declaration.

Now let’s get to work – together – to make it a reality.