

**Speech given by Bernadette Ségol, ETUC General Secretary  
GWU 70th Anniversary Congress  
3 October 2013 & Malta**

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Mr Prime Minister,  
Dear President,  
Dear Tony,  
Dear Friends,

Thank you for inviting me, on behalf of the European Trade Union Confederation, to address you on this historic occasion – the Seventieth Anniversary of the GWU.

Your union has played a major part in modern Malta's historical development, prior to, and since your country's independence in 1964.

Being French, I shall pass quickly and diplomatically over the interlude in Napoleonic times when we ruled not too well for a couple of years...

You were once described as 'the biggest trade union in the world' in terms of the proportion of the Maltese population your membership represented. I do wish that all ETUC national affiliates enjoyed the kind of trade union density that you have forged here.

At the same time, if I may say so, you have quite a way to go in relation to female membership, which is very low compared to other European countries – reflecting the fact that women's participation in the labour market here is the lowest in Europe. In 2011, the employment gap with the EU27 for women aged 15 or over stood at over 25 percentage points. Being a woman and General Secretary of the ETUC, I would naturally warmly encourage you to work to integrate women in the labour market and in decision making.

Friends, you are not the only ones to mark a notable anniversary. This year, the ETUC celebrates its Fortieth. And the GWU has been with us since September 1973. You celebrate also your 40th anniversary of membership to the ETUC.

I know that membership of the European Union has been a controversial issue. But, so far as the integration of Maltese workers into the European trade union movement is concerned, we have always appreciated your active and loyal involvement as an affiliate from the beginning.

I also know that the question of inter-union relations is a difficult issue, for many reasons that you know much better than I. My predecessor as General Secretary, John Monks, told me as he was leaving that it was one of the hot potatoes remaining on his agenda. He also told me about the ETUC's efforts to assist in resolving them. We have made some progress, but I reaffirm here our willingness, and my personal commitment, to continue to help in any way we can.

Friends, over the last 40 years we have together won some battles for European working people, and faced many challenges.

The crisis precipitated by the cave-in of financial capitalism five years ago is certainly the worse. Workers are being made to pay with their jobs the price of others' greed.

The European Union is facing record levels of unemployment (26.5 million unemployed, including 5.7 million young people), insecurity, and inequality. The socio-economic consequences of dealing with the crisis have reached the limits of what is socially acceptable in many countries. The EU has stood for progress for many decades for its social model which is often held up as an example across the world; this model is now under threat. This is a result of the policies imposed, mainly for ideological reasons, rather than the EU itself. The reactions of populists from all sides are dangerous for employment and oppose the values that we defend.

Yesterday the European Commission published a plan aimed at strengthening the social dimension of the Economic and Monetary Union. I am glad to see some movement at long last in response to our campaigning. Indeed, in parallel to economic indicators there will be social indicators, for instance on inequality or poverty or on household income. But this is certainly too little since these indicators will only accompany, though I fear that it will be too little and too late.

The ETUC has since our Athens Congress been calling for urgent action to invest for sustainable growth and decent jobs. We are having to draw up our own programme to press on the European institutions which have been in a state of paralysis. A lot of hope had been invested in the result of the German elections. That excuse no longer holds. As Dickens said, "procrastination is the thief of time". We agree with Charles Dickens: We need strong action now.

And we need solidarity. Solidarity is a word very dear to trade unions and dear to the ETUC of course. What we need in the EU now is economic solidarity. We are an economic bloc, not a collection of separate states; we need to grow together and to help each other to grow. This is why we propose a European investment plan for good jobs and good future.

The elections for the European Parliament next May offer us an opportunity to campaign for our policies to get Europe out of the neo-liberal rut. I am sure that you will be pressing our Manifesto on the candidates here in Malta.

One issue of particular concern to you and to the ETUC is precarious work, and it will be high on our agenda. There is a flagrant abuse of non-standard contracts and the use of independent contractors to bypass union agreements. Trade unions were born to fight exploitation; precarious workers are exploited; it has been and will be our job to stop this abuse.

That is why that we demand that a social progress protocol should stop the erosion of social rights because of economic freedoms.

This is why we demand that existing statutory minimum wages should be increased. Decent wages help to boost growth and domestic demand. A minimum social income should be introduced, based on common European principles.

I am also very aware that migration is a sensitive issue across Europe, and even more so here, on our frontline. I was informed of the dramatic event a few miles off Lampedusa; so much suffering can leave no one indifferent. Our call for European solidarity must also apply in respect of immigrants. At the same time, I would like to applaud the GWU's position that, rather than blaming the migrants, aims at being constructive in dealing with the exploitation of which they are the victims.

Friends, we need a change of course in Europe to build another European project based on social progress to end austerity, unemployment, poverty, inequality, and wage and fiscal dumping.

I thank you for your support to the ETUC, I wish you a happy celebration and wish you strength in the future.

I know I can count on you