

**Speech given by Luca Visentini, ETUC General Secretary,
at the ETUC Mid-Term Conference on 29-31 May 2017 in Rome, Italy**

Dear authorities and guests, Commissioner, Minister,
Dear comrades and friends, compagne e compagni, amiche e amici,

It is ten years since the financial crisis of 2007-2008.

Ten years lost and wasted. Ten dark years that have been like an ice age in which the hopes and aspirations of working people were frozen.

A banking crisis led to government debt crisis. Economic crisis led to political crisis. The austerity medicine mistakenly chosen by the EU and member states has created widespread disillusion, and a backlash against Europe. Violent conflict in neighbouring regions, unprecedented numbers of refugees fleeing to safety in Europe, and terrorism at home have added to the sense of crisis.

Are we now seeing the first signs of a European spring?

Clearly Europe is now discovering some slow growth and the gradual retreat of mass unemployment. But recession followed by tentative recovery is no cause for celebration.

Instead, what offers some encouragement are signs of the reversal of the rise of anti-European and anti-foreigner forces in some recent elections, and of an emerging political debate about more worker-friendly policies, increasing wages and tackling inequality. Fairness and the needs of working people are coming back to the political agenda.

The shock of the political fallout from the economic crisis has over the last year created a mood of reflection on the future – of Europe, of labour, of globalisation. Mainstream politicians on the left and right know they face extinction unless they address working people's concerns. Perhaps the penny has dropped.

EU institutions are now releasing funds for investment, talking up wage rises and even increased public spending. The European Commission has forced an EU debate on a European Pillar of Social Rights, on the social dimension of the EU and fairer globalisation. A reflection on the European Monetary Union is expected in few days' time. On the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome national Governments pledged to work towards a social Europe which promotes economic and social progress. On Brexit, EU member states appear unanimous in agreement.

After Brexit and Trump, voters have rejected far-right candidates for President in Austria and France, and kept a far-right party out of Government in the Netherlands. We are looking forward to seeing what the results of the federal elections in Germany will bring to German and European working people. But let's not get carried away.

Austerity is not dead. The EU's Stability and Growth Pact is a straight-jacket preventing many countries from investing in better public services and jobs and growth. The recent third agreement between Greece and its creditors shows that the neo-liberal beast is still hurting people's and workers' hopes and lives. But some European leaders are now pushing for more flexibility, for an end to austerity, for more room for growth-friendly economic policies and to ease the burden on working people who have borne the brunt of the crisis.

New policies are far from being established as the new consensus. The European Pillar of Social Rights is long overdue, could be more ambitious, and might yet be killed off by hostile Governments and employers.

And the world is not standing still after the crisis. There are many difficult challenges ahead. Brexit was not the choice of the ETUC or of UK trade unions, and we need to continue to insist that the rights of working people and citizens must be paramount. The growth of bogus self-employment, temporary or part-time work, and other precarious jobs are the dark side of today's slowly reducing unemployment, and must be challenged by trade union organising and ultimately new laws. Digitalisation and climate policies need to be accompanied by intelligent strategy for a just transition that equip working people and industrial regions to adapt and create new jobs.

The humanitarian refugee crisis is not resolved. Refugees are stuck in Turkey, Libya, Greece, Italy and the Balkans. Trade unions must redouble our efforts in calling for a fair redistribution of refugees across Europe and in working with employers to integrate refugees into the workplace.

We sense an opportunity. Some signs of movement in the right direction, and what is needed from all progressives is a strong push. Now is the moment, not to proclaim yet another setback, but to push harder than ever for what working people desperately need: increased public investment and services, and to tackle inequality through decent social protection, fair taxation, fair wages and good working conditions across every EU member state.

It's also the moment for trade unions to be more active than ever in efforts to manage digitalisation and climate action to ensure that working people are not left on the scrap heap, to manage globalisation, to reduce persistent gender and regional inequalities. Trade unions need to demand action on these challenges throughout the trade union movement, with employers and government at every level from the local to the EU-wide.

Trade unions gathered here in Rome for the three-days of the ETUC Midterm Conference, to assess what was done and achieved over last two years after our Congress in Paris, and to debate our priorities for the Future of Europe and a more Social Europe.

The Paris Manifesto, the Document on the Role of the ETUC, the ETUC Action Plan, more recently the ETUC Platform for the Future of Europe; moreover, the Social Progress Protocol, the ETUC extraordinary plan for investment called 'A New Path for Europe', the Pay Rise Campaign: these are the ambitious sets of proposals and plans for action we have launched over the last years.

We are committed to deliver, and we are here in Rome to discuss how to make them real. We want to respond to workers' needs and expectations with concrete solutions, and to do so we need your help, we need to act together.

Investment for sustainable growth and quality job creation.

Just transition towards low-carbon economy, sustainable digitalisation and automation, fair globalisation, a progressive trade agenda, and the future of work.

Pay rise and upward wage convergence, through stronger collective bargaining, social dialogue and workers' participation.

Build up social Europe and strengthen social rights, through a strong European Pillar of Social Rights which makes a difference to workers.

Fight social and wage dumping and achieve full equal treatment and integration, by paving paths for fair mobility and migration.

These are the priorities we would like to discuss with you, to design together a better Europe for our future.

I will not go through all this now, we have several panels for discussion during the next two days; I want to take the opportunity to send some messages to the institutional representatives who are here with us this afternoon.

Thank you very much indeed for accepting our invitation.

On investment, we appreciate the plan presented by President Juncker, particularly in its second version, as we highly value the role that the ECB, the EIB and the other European financial institutions and vehicles are playing to relaunch investment in Europe, linking it up with job creation.

Nevertheless, as you know, we think this is not enough. Because the quantity of money is not sufficient (2% of GDP is the target set by all international financial institutions, and by the ETUC in our own plan, to have a significant impact on growth). And because the fiscal space allowed to member states to invest public money is still too tight.

We are all aware that this requires reform of the European fiscal rules and economic governance, but it's possible to do it without changing the Treaties, and we expect the reflection on the future of EMU and Semester process to go in this direction.

The ETUC has set its proposals on both flexibility and fiscal capacity, including the idea of creating a EU/EMU Treasury. We hope these elements will be part of the discussion.

We know how big the divisions among member states are, and we have appreciated the role that the Italian Government has played so far. We encourage you to continue pushing for this, and to create alliances to achieve such reforms.

On climate change, digitalisation, globalisation, international trade, the future of work we will spend days in discussions, but what I would like to tell you now is that we want the European and national institutions to make sure that no one is left behind by these processes, that for each job destroyed more than one (a quality one) is created, and that there is public funding and institutional governance available to make all this possible.

We want to thank here the European Parliament for its decision to support our proposal for a Just Transition Fund to manage climate policy impacts on the economy and jobs. We ask the European Commission to follow up, to set up the fund, and to include the 'just transition' in the very promising reflection Paper on Globalisation.

We would like to congratulate the Italian Finance Minister Pierpaolo Padoan for having introduced during the G7 meetings the very interesting idea of a WEB Tax. We want to encourage and participate in this discussion, to bring social justice and workers' rights into the digital economy.

And we are going to adopt in a few weeks an ETUC initiative for a progressive and fair trade agenda, which we want to discuss and negotiate with the European Commission and all other trade union partners and institutional interlocutors over the world.

The ETUC has launched a Pay Rise campaign, to respond to the incredible drop in wages during the last decade in Europe; to allow wages to rise to catch up with productivity trends; to address inequalities in wage share and massive wage divergence between Eastern and Western countries. We are convinced that increasing wages is not only a matter of social justice, but also a win-win deal to support internal demand and economic growth. I call on all trade unions to fully support this campaign, and to increase efforts to spread the word about our Europe-wide initiative on wages.

Of course, wages are a matter for negotiation between social partners, and we must convince the employers first about the added value of such a deal. But institutions have an essential role to play, when it comes to stopping austerity on wages and unwanted interference in collective bargaining practices (it happened again few weeks ago in Greece, regardless of President Juncker's promise); institutions can also create a good environment to strengthen minimum wage systems and collective bargaining coverage, by supporting capacity building of social partners and establishing legal frameworks for delivering and extending collective agreements.

Dear Commissioner, we appreciate the work delivered by DG Employment in the framework of the European Semester, which has gone some way to rebalancing the previous narrative on wage moderation, and to increasing trade union involvement in the process. Nevertheless, we expect wages and collective bargaining, and social dialogue and workers' participation, to be crucial principles and objectives for the implementation of the Social Pillar.

We reaffirm that the ETUC considers the establishment of a European Pillar of Social Rights a fundamental step towards a fairer Europe and the necessary rebalancing of the last decade of austerity and attacks to workers' rights and social cohesion. We therefore fully support this initiative, as the President Juncker's idea of a Triple-A social Europe.

But we want a Pillar that works, that addresses workers' expectations and needs, and delivers concrete results. We ask the Commission to be ambitious in its proposals, to set a floor of rights and clear non-regression clauses, to set clear standards for upward convergence, to create effective tools to reduce precariousness at work and boost quality job creation, to address gender gaps and any other discrimination at work, and to frame the Pillar in the European Semester, making sure the European economic governance becomes a 'social and economic governance', with social rights and economic freedoms at the same level of importance.

We are fully aware of the difficulties that this process creates between the Commission and member states, and how delicate the process for proclamation of the Pillar will be. But be sure the ETUC is on your side and that trade unions are doing their best to convince all social partners to be on board, and each member state to join. I've personally met several prime ministers during last months, and we will continue doing so to make sure it can be delivered by the end of the year.

I would like to thank the Italian and the Swedish prime ministers. Prime Minister Gentiloni, for organising the extraordinary social summit we held here in Rome on 24th March, and for having put in place extraordinary efforts to include the social dimension in the Rome Declaration adopted by the EU27 leaders the day after. Prime minister Loefven, for planning the Social Summit on 17th November in Gothenburg, which we hope will be the occasion for EU leaders to endorse the Pillar and relaunch Social Europe.

Finally, I would like to address mobility and migration, which are burning issues for Europe, and for my own country, Italy.

Every month, every week, we face emergencies, we see people dying at sea. We cannot accept this situation in silence any longer. We can't accept any longer the lack of responsibility and solidarity of most EU member states towards migrants and refugees. We know the Commission, and President Juncker, tried hard to set an asylum policy for the EU, which was blocked by governments. We have heard Juncker saying here in Rome that Italy is 'saving the honour of Europe'. As Germany, Greece and Sweden did.

It's high time for Europe to take care of refugees and migrants, for both humanitarian reasons and long-term economic and social interests. And this must be done by meeting the needs of migrants and native citizens and workers, to avoid them being played against each other by populist and xenophobic forces. Unfair competition among workers, unemployment and social exclusion, social and wage dumping, these are our enemies. We need to build up fair mobility and migration, by providing everybody with quality job opportunities, full equal treatment, and integration and inclusion in the labour market and society. We, the trade unions, are at the forefront in this battle. We will never give up on human rights and social justice, and will continue pushing institutions and employers at all levels for realising this together.

Distinguished guests, dear comrades and friends,

In opening our Conference, I want to highlight to all of you that the ETUC, the European trade union movement, the biggest and strongest in the world, is committed to change the painful narrative we have faced over last years, and to act and cooperate with all those who want to build up a better, social and more just European Union, for the future of its citizens and working people.