

Ursula von der Leyen
President of the European Commission
[Letter sent by e-mail]

Urgent open letter concerning the European Union and Tunisia partnership package

Dear President of the European Commission Ms Ursula von der Leyen,

I am contacting you concerning the EU-Tunisia partnership package covering key issues such as trade, energy and migration, that you announced on the 11th of June following your meeting with Tunisian president Kais Saied along with the Italian and Dutch prime ministers, Giorgia Meloni and Mark Rutte.

The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) underscores that financial support from the EU to the Tunisian government must be made conditional on the full respect for human rights, including workers and trade union rights, the respect of social partners' role and social dialogue.

We would like to remind you that the Tunisian government has been waging attacks against trade unions, migrants and ethnic minorities, journalists and civil society organisations. As you know, on February 18-19, 2023, the ETUC General Secretary Esther Lynch was ordered by the Tunisian Government to leave the country after taking part in a protest against its crackdown on trade unions and workers' rights and against reforms that would make the cost-of-living crisis even worse [see ETUC letter on 20 February 2023].

The treatment of the ETUC General Secretary is the tip of the iceberg of the escalating campaign of intimidation and harassment being waged against trade unions by President Kais Saied. This campaign included: (i) the arrest of UGTT official Anis Al-Kaabi for a legitimate and legal strike; (ii) the sacking of trade union officials; (iii) malicious lawsuits against trade unionists; (iv) using law enforcement to monitor and restrict trade union activity; (v) promoting yellow trade unions.

Several Tunisian, European and international trade unions and human rights organizations have raised their concerns about the undermining of judicial independence, the arrests of political opponents, the military trials of civilians, and the ongoing crackdown on freedom of expression and threats to civil society. Moreover, racism has also recently escalated, catalysed by the discriminatory speech against migrants from sub-Saharan Africa by the Tunisian President on February 21, 2023.

We reiterate that the “partnership package” must make sure that financial support be conditional on the full respect by the Tunisian government for human rights, including workers and trade union rights, the respect of social partners’ role and social dialogue.

The ETUC condemns the policy of a ‘Fortress Europe’, the strengthening of border controls and the return of migrants. The EU must safeguard European democratic values and establish a European path of solidarity and shared responsibility and provide safe and regular migration pathways.

Similarly any trade partnership or deal on energy must also be based on respect of international standards as that should be the expectation for all parties. We cannot allow unscrupulous governments to use the EU’s need for alternative energy sources to extract concessions on respect of international norms. If we allow that to happen we undermine the international rules based system.

We call on the European Commission to take these elements fully on board in the next steps in the relationship with the Tunisian government.

Looking forward to your reply, we would appreciate the opportunity for a meeting to discuss these issues of paramount importance.

Yours sincerely,
Esther Lynch,

General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation