

“Towards Fair Work for All: Embracing Intersectionality in the Fight Against Discrimination”

Opening Speech by Esther Lynch, General Secretary, ETUC

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Thank you for being here today, united by our shared commitment to equality and justice in the workplace.

As the General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation, I speak on behalf of 45 million workers and their trade unions across Europe when I say: discrimination has no place in our workplaces, in our unions, or in our societies.

But to truly root it out, we must acknowledge a fundamental truth: discrimination is not one-dimensional. It is complex, interwoven, and often invisible to those who do not experience it directly.

This is why the ETUC is calling for a bold, intersectional approach to combating discrimination at work.

Intersectionality is not a buzzword or a passing trend. It is a call to action. It challenges us to recognize our own areas of oversight and stand in true solidarity — not just with workers like us, but with workers whose struggles may be different, and whose voices are too often ignored.

Intersectionality means recognising that individuals face discrimination based on a combination of factors — gender, race, class, disability, sexual orientation, age, religion, and migration status — and that these do not exist in isolation. A Black woman may face racism and sexism simultaneously. A migrant worker with a disability may be doubly marginalised. Our fight must address these overlapping injustices if we are to achieve real equality.

We cannot accept that workers with identical skills and experience are paid less, promoted less, or excluded from opportunities because of who they

are. We cannot allow harassment, bullying, and systemic bias to persist in any form. We, as trade unionists, know better than anyone that an injury to one is an injury to all — and solidarity must be the foundation of our response.

As trade unionists, we must make intersectionality a core part of our strategies. This means collecting better data — disaggregated, detailed, and sensitive to the realities of diverse identities at work. It means involving affected workers in the design of policies that affect them. It means making space for leadership that reflects the true diversity of Europe's workforce.

It also means shifting our culture.

The ETUC is committed to this work.

Through collective bargaining, inclusive training programs, and political advocacy, we are pushing for stronger protections and real change. I thank everyone involved in the project on trade unions against discrimination. It is an example of that commitment bringing insights gained during five learning seminars on racism, gender equality, LGBTIQ+ rights, ageism, and disability discrimination in the framework of the TUAD project, a number of fundamental strategies and actions have been developed.

You will hear more during the conference.

We want a Europe where no worker is left out

Today, we face a renewed and dangerous threat to equality: the rise of the far right across Europe. These forces seek to divide us — by stoking hatred, by glorifying sexism, scapegoating migrants, by attacking LGBTQ+ rights, and especially undermining trans-people right to exist.

Instead of creating a sense of belonging rooted in a pride of shared achievements, embracing diversity, being proud of who you are without the need to exclude or vilifying others, we witness the growth of a toxic nationalism built on fear, division, and superiority, scapegoating minorities and rejecting European cooperation.

We cannot be silent.

The far right does not speak for workers. Their politics offer no solutions to the cost-of-living crisis, precarious jobs, or workplace exploitation. Instead, they offer only division and discrimination — the very opposite of what trade unions stand for.

As trade unionists, we must stand firm. We must call out anti-migrant, racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, antisemitism, islamophobia, xenophobia, and yes classism, wherever they appear — whether in political discourse or the staff canteen. We must ensure that equality is embedded in every collective agreement, every workplace policy, and every recruitment and promotion process.

This is not a fight we can win with words alone. It requires action — real, measurable commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion. It means empowering workers to speak up, holding employers accountable, and demanding that EU institutions enforce anti-discrimination legislation with strength and consistency.

Enforcing anti-discrimination legislation is not an option for the Commission it's an obligation. Immediate action by Commissioner for Equality Hadja Lahbib is needed. To hold Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland to account for their anti LGBTI actions. To expressly demand the US administration to withdraw the letter sent to companies in Europe threatening the loss of contracts with the US government if they have Diversity, Equality and Inclusion programmes or agreements in place.

The near witch hunt against Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) programmes coming from the Trump administration is no role model for Europe to follow. Attempts by U.S. officials to intimidate European companies over DEI programs are both politically inappropriate and legally questionable under EU law.

That's why it is profoundly concerning that instead of tackling the problem the Commission proposes instead to withdraw the Horizontal Equal Treatment Directive, and this at a time when discrimination on all grounds

is on the rise. The EU Barometer reports that in 2023 over 21% of people reported experiencing discrimination in the past year – up from 15% in 2019. “LGBTIQ+ people report the highest rates of discrimination at 67% on average across the EU, followed closely by people who belong to an ethnic or skin colour minority (59%)” [OECD].

Doing nothing represents a betrayal of all those who daily experience discrimination in the EU.

This is the time for the EU to stand up, show global leadership against discrimination and refuse to backdown to bullying and instead to vigorously uphold EU anti-discrimination rules

And present ambitious legislation against discrimination, this year, no later than when the updated equality strategies are presented.

Formally request that the U.S. administration withdraw its letter to EU-based companies challenging their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives in Europe.

Ensure that European businesses and social partners can continue to implement inclusive policies and collective agreements free from foreign political interference

We also remind all EU Member States of their binding commitments under the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and relevant anti-discrimination directives. National governments have a responsibility to:

Safeguard and promote inclusive workplace policies within their jurisdictions;

Protect businesses and workers from external pressure that undermines EU law;

Publicly support companies implementing equality, diversity and inclusion strategies and collective agreement in line with national and EU legislation;

Let us be clear: equality in society is not a side issue — it is central to workers' rights.

And when we adopt an intersectional approach, we are not just acknowledging difference — we are building unity, strength, and justice for all.

Together, we can build a Europe where everyone is treated with dignity and respect, respect no matter our age, or what work we do, no matter what part of town we live, no matter where we and our parents are from or who we do or do not worship or who we love.

Let us make our workplaces truly inclusive. Let us fight all forms of discrimination, not as isolated issues, but as interconnected injustices.

Let us take intersectionality — not just in theory, but in every negotiation and every demand for justice.

Thank you.

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