

Note to the press

Today, the ETUC has signed the "Joint Initiative on Standardisation" (JIS), a voluntary and non-binding initiative aimed at reinforcing the public-private partnership underpinning European standardisation by identifying actions to be delivered within the next 4 years. The ETUC has been one of the few societal stakeholders that actively contributed to the drafting process of the JIS, a text consisting of two parts: political commitments shared by all signatories and concrete actions proposal to which signatories commit according to their respective competences. The next step to further define and implement actions laid down in the JIS includes the establishment of a "steering committee" that will follow-up the process and monitor its progresses in the coming 4 years.

The ETUC supports the JIS and welcomes the commitment of all participants to further support the inclusiveness of standardisation processes at national and European level and to recognize each other as genuine strategic partners. The ETUC is also glad to see that the potential contribution of standards for societal welfare is recognized as well as the need to ensure public policy interests and objective are taken into account by mostly private European and national standard-setting bodies. In line with these considerations, the ETUC strongly supports actions aimed at lowering barriers to trade unions and societal stakeholders' participation in national, European and international standardisation processes. The intention to study the societal impacts of standards, in addition to their economic contribution, is also welcomed by the ETUC as it will help to promote a better understanding of the wide range of societal and trade unions interests at stake in standardisation.

Notwithstanding, the ETUC remains highly critical towards any move to increasingly use standardisation in the internal market to replace legislation and to by-pass difficult legislative processes. In this connection, the ETUC regrets the lack of a shared commitment on the limits of standardisation: European standardisation must not encroach upon European and national labour laws, collective agreements and collective bargaining. This is an issue of democracy regarding legislation and of respect of the prerogatives of trade unions/social partners regarding collective agreements. Private European standardisation shall not be devised as the preferred policy option to tackle perceived legislative gaps or public policy concerns, including in the framework of the EC's better regulation agenda.

The ETUC is also very concerned to see an action, under the heading "coordination, cooperation, transparency and inclusiveness" aimed at reinforcing the role of large industry players in the European standardisation system (ESS) by establishing a "Standards Market Relevance Roundtable (SMARRT)". The creation of a roundtable limited to EC's officials and industry representatives to discuss standardisation requests will not contribute to the transparency of the ESS. Moreover, the need for such a roundtable is highly questionable. European standardisation bodies are already thoroughly consulted on EC standardisation requests on which they promote the views of big companies that dominates standard-setting processes and governing bodies. In consequence, the ETUC assesses this action as being at odds with the spirit of the 1025/2012 Regulation and its provisions aimed at achieving a more balanced representation in the ESS.

Even though the action establishing the SMARRT roundtable falls outside the remit of ETUC competences, in order to mitigate its adverse effects on the transparency of the ESS, the ETUC asks for the agenda and content of the roundtable discussions to be publicly available. The ETUC also regrets that actions aimed at providing clearer information on standards under development – allowing, among others, to easily assess their relevance for workers – could not be included. The same holds true for an initiative aimed at making "harmonized standards", that is standards having legal effect, available for free considering that their development is in most cases already publicly funded. The ETUC will thus use all its endeavour to convince the steering committee to take ETUC demands on board.

Regarding the future of the JIS, the ETUC strongly support the establishment of a "steering

committee" in order for this non-binding and voluntary initiative to lead to the delivery of concrete results. The ETUC insists and will be very keen on having concrete outcomes regarding trade unions (and societal stakeholders) long held demands to lower barriers to participation in national, European and international standardisation bodies. In the event the JIS should fail to provide the expected outcomes, the ETUC would seriously reconsider supporting any continuation of a Joint Initiative after 2019.

Moreover, in order for constructive discussions to take place in the steering committee, the ETUC urges its participants to define, in the first line, the working method and decision-making process of the group. In the likely event the steering committee would follow a consensus decision making process, the ETUC requires the consensus to be assessed according to categories of stakeholders involved (i.e. societal stakeholders, business associations, standardisation bodies, public authorities). In other words, any proposal facing strong disagreement by one specific category of stakeholders, even though in a minored position such as societal stakeholders, shall not be considered as making consensus by the steering committee.

The ETUC also encourages the steering committee to develop a more ambitious action on inclusiveness to reflect the recommendation laid down in the almost unanimously adopted EESC opinion on standardisation¹ and asking for societal stakeholders' free access to national standardisation bodies mirroring European and international standards development processes. Such an ambitious goal is of uttermost importance to ensure a robust 21st century European standardisation system responding to the needs of workers and the society at large.

The ETUC remains confident that the steering committee will take due account of ETUC's proposed working methods and will deliver concrete results achieving a more democratic standardisation for the benefits of all.

¹ See OPINION (INT/783) of the European Economic and Social Committee on the "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council and the European Economic and Social Committee – The annual Union work programme for European standardisation for 2016", adopted on 25 May 2016 and available at <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.int-opinions.38146>.