

ETUC resolution on the Roadmap for the ETUC work on the Conference on the Future of Europe

Adopted at the virtual Executive Committee Meeting of 22-23 March 2021

Recent developments and events, such as Brexit, the rule of law situation in some EU member states and the Covid-19 pandemic, have put the European project and democracy at risk. The EU is at a crossroads and must rise to the challenges that it is facing: making a relevant change of direction and committing to its founding principles, or facing an unprecedented political crisis.

In this context, the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) welcomes the intention to organise a Conference on the Future of Europe. The Conference must constitute the opportunity for a real, forward-looking discussion concerning the future of the European Union to ensure that the recovery from the Covid-19 crisis paves the way for a fairer, more inclusive and sustainable European economy and society, based on a Renewed Social Contract for Europe.¹

It is necessary for the ETUC to prepare for the Conference, particularly by setting out the main priorities and objectives of the European trade union movement and preparing the trade union mobilisation.

Background

In her political guidelines in 2019, Ursula von der Leyen stated her intention to organise a Conference on the Future of Europe.² On 15 January 2020, the European Parliament approved a Resolution defining its position on the Conference. This Resolution contains several positive elements, these including the demand that social issues are amongst the priorities of the Conference and the inclusion of representatives of the European social partners in the Plenary of the Conference.³ On 22 January 2020, the European Commission published a Communication on the Conference on the Future of Europe, outlining its vision.⁴ On 24 June 2020, the Council reached a common position on the Conference on the Future of Europe.⁵

The ETUC has engaged with the EU institutions to stress the need for the Conference to include a strong social dimension. The ETUC has pushed for: (i) ensuring the full involvement of social partners in the Conference; (ii) ensuring that the priorities of the Conference include a strong focus on social issues; (iii) supporting the approach that the Conference discusses the possibility of Treaty changes and – in this framework – the

¹ See also: [Social Europe should be at the centre of the Conference on the Future of Europe. Statement Adopted at the Executive Committee Meeting of 2-3 July 2020.](#)

² "I want Europeans to build the future of our Union. They should play a leading and active part in setting our priorities and our level of ambition. I want citizens to have their say at a Conference on the Future of Europe, to start in 2020 and run for two years. The Conference should bring together citizens, including a significant role for young people, civil society and European institutions as equal partners. The Conference should be well prepared with a clear scope and clear objectives, agreed between the Parliament, the Council and the Commission. I am ready to follow up on what is agreed, including by legislative action if appropriate. I am also open to Treaty change. Should there be a Member of the European Parliament put forward to chair the Conference, I will fully support this idea". [A Union that strives for more. My agenda for Europe. Political guidelines for the next European Commission 2019-2024](#), p. 19.

³ [European Parliament resolution of 15 January 2020 on the European Parliament's position on the Conference on the Future of Europe.](#)

⁴ [Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council Shaping the Conference on the Future of Europe](#), COM (2020)27.

⁵ [Conference on the Future of Europe: Council position](#), 24 June 2020.

introduction of a Social Progress Protocol to the EU Treaties. In March 2020, social partners sent a joint letter to the EU institutions concerning the Conference, stressing the need to guarantee the involvement of social partners and to ensure that the priorities of the Conference include a strong focus on economic and social issues. The ETUC Executive Committee adopted a statement on the Conference on the Future of Europe at the beginning of July 2020. The statement was published and circulated to the relevant actors in the European Parliament, Commission and Council.⁶

In March, the institutions finally reached an agreement on the Joint Declaration, which will allow the Conference to start. The Declaration was signed by EP President David Sassoli, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and the Prime Minister of Portugal, António Costa, on 10 March 2021.⁷ The signing of the Declaration allows the institutions to start organising the Conference. The intention is to launch the Conference on 9 May.

The Joint Declaration includes several important elements, but also problematic aspects on which trade unions will need to be very active and vigilant. The document stresses the fact that the Conference should focus on social issues. It mentions the need to strengthen Europe's social contract, to address inequalities and to ensure that "the European Union is a fair, sustainable, innovative and competitive economy that leaves no one behind".⁸ The Conference should reach conclusions by Spring 2022. This still leaves the possibility for the Conference to continue after that date and to provide further conclusions.

The Presidents of the European Parliament, of the Council and of the European Commission will act as the Joint Presidency of the Conference. An Executive Board will be set up and will be composed of representatives from the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission. "The Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee may also be invited as observers, as well as representatives of other EU bodies and social partners where appropriate". The Executive Board will take decisions by consensus on the work of the Conference. A Conference Plenary will debate the recommendations. It will be composed "of representatives from the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission, as well as representatives from all national Parliaments, on an equal footing, and citizens. The Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Committee, the social partners, and civil society will also be represented".⁹

On the basis of the Joint Declaration, the Conference will include a "multitude of events and debates", as well as an interactive multilingual digital platform.¹⁰ At the European level, the European institutions commit to organise European citizens' panels. Each Member State and institution can organise additional events. The inputs from the different initiatives will be collected and published throughout the Conference via the

⁶ *Social Europe should be at the centre of the Conference on the Future of Europe.*

⁷ [Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe. Engaging with citizens for democracy – Building a more resilient Europe.](#)

⁸ *The document stresses the need to strengthen Europe's social contract, to address inequalities and to ensure that "the European Union is a fair, sustainable, innovative and competitive economy that leaves no one behind". Discussions will cover – amongst others – "building a healthy continent, the fight against climate change and environmental challenges, an economy that works for people, social fairness, equality and intergenerational solidarity, Europe's digital transformation, European rights and values including the Rule of Law, migration challenges, security, the EU's role in the world, the Union's democratic foundations, and how to strengthen democratic processes governing the European Union. Discussions can also cover cross-cutting issues related to the EU's ability to deliver on policy priorities, such as better regulation, application of subsidiarity and proportionality, implementation and enforcement of the acquis and transparency". It will be possible to add further issues to the agenda of the Conference. Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe.*

⁹ *Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe.*

¹⁰ *Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe.*

digital platform. The ideas expressed during the Conference events should result in concrete recommendations for EU action through a feedback mechanism.

The Joint Declaration recognises the role that social partners should play in the Conference¹¹ and foresees the participation of social partners' representatives in the Plenary, and the possibility for social partners to be invited in the Executive Board as observers. However, the presence of social partners in all the meetings of the Executive Board is not guaranteed. For the Conference to be successful, it needs to be based on a bottom-up approach and to recognise and promote the specific role of social partners at European and national levels. It should continue after the spring of 2022, to ensure enough time for proper discussions on the challenges the EU is facing, and to put forward ambitious conclusions.

The ETUC will engage to ensure that social partners are permanently included in the Executive Board discussions and in the preparation of the Conference. Conference's events and initiatives at European and national level and the digital platform should respect and promote – and not undermine – the role of social partners.

It is crucial that the scope and objectives of the Conference are clear, ambitious and achievable, and that they are jointly agreed and communicated before the launch of the Conference. Otherwise, there is the risk of creating false expectations, which could lead to the disillusionment of citizens and workers on the EU's ability to deliver.

Social Europe at the centre of the Conference on the Future of Europe

The Conference should be an opportunity for a real and in-depth discussion, with the full involvement of the European and national institutions, social partners and civil society organisations, on the future of Europe and the need for the recovery from Covid-19 to pave the way for a fairer society. Social Europe should be at the centre of the Conference. The Conference should not be a bureaucratic exercise nor focus only on institutional matters, it should constitute a key moment in the process of construction of the European Union of the future and be based on an ambitious agenda.

Today, democracy is under attack. The Conference should address the crisis of democracy, at the institutional, economic and social level. The crisis of democracy is the consequence, amongst others, of initiatives eliminating or weakening fundamental rights, including workers' and trade union rights, and of the management of the previous economic crises by the EU and national governments through austerity policies, which have hurt the most vulnerable. It is necessary to reverse these trends in order to strengthen democracy in Europe. Democratic institutions must be defended and reinforced, and decision-making processes improved. At the same time, it is necessary to strengthen democracy in the economy and society, including by recognising and supporting trade unions and civil society, by redistributing power and wealth, by respecting and reinforcing workers' and trade union rights, by protecting the most vulnerable in the current crisis, including through renewed engagement in public services, public goods, and social protection. The ETUC will be at the forefront in defending and promoting strong trade unions, social dialogue, collective bargaining, and workers' participation, as fundamental tools for economic, social and workplace democracy.¹²

¹¹ "Under the umbrella of the Conference and in full respect of the principles set out in this Joint Declaration, we will organise events in partnership with civil society and stakeholders at European, national, regional and local level, with national and regional Parliaments, the Committee of the Regions, the Economic and Social Committee, social partners and academia. Their involvement will ensure that the Conference goes far beyond Europe's capital cities and reaches every corner of the Union. Events will be organised under a set of common principles to be agreed by the structures of the Conference". Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe.

¹² See also [ETUC Action Programme 2019-2023](#), Par. 14-15.

The social contract underpinning the EU social market economy and Social Model is also under threat. In the past years, the benefits of the single market have not been shared between capital and labour, and many workers and communities have been left behind. This is the basis for widespread social discontent among workers and citizens. Urgent new solutions are necessary.¹³ The Covid-19 crisis has further exposed and exacerbated this situation, including by impacting more severely vulnerable, precarious, young, female and BAME workers.

Europe has neglected its public services. In the last decades, coordinated austerity and marketisation policies as well as the continuing underinvestment have undermined public funding as well as the accessibility and affordability of many public services, including health and social care services. The future of Europe conference should underline the vital role and place of the public sector and public services in Europe's development and its future. Discussions on health should focus on how the EU can contribute to ensuring that all in the EU, regardless of their economic situation and place of residence, enjoy the right to good health and have equal access to affordable and high quality health and social care services, delivered by resilient, well-staffed and well-equipped public systems with universal coverage.

A renewed Social Contract for Europe is urgently needed. The Conference on the Future of Europe should focus on the necessity to reinforce the European social model and social market economy. It should discuss a Renewed Social Contract for Europe, to ensure that the recovery from the Covid-19 crisis paves the way to a fairer, more inclusive and sustainable society.¹⁴

The Conference should propose a vision for the European society after the Covid-19 crisis. The recovery must deliver for working people and ensure socially just green and digital transitions, where nobody is left behind; the principles enshrined in the European Pillar of Social Rights and the UN Agenda 2030 should be the cornerstone of the recovery. A strong link between the Conference on the Future of Europe and the results of the Social Summit on 7 May should be ensured.

The recovery must be based on redistribution and upward convergence, quality job creation in all sectors and reinforced investments in public services and social protection, including ensuring the right to decent pensions. The respect of workers' and trade union rights, social dialogue, stronger collective bargaining and democracy at work constitute the necessary basis for a fair recovery. The improvement of living and working conditions in Europe, in particular for the most vulnerable, and equality between men and women should be at the forefront of the discussions of the Conference to pave the way for a fairer future for Europe. The Resilience and Recovery Facility and the national Recovery and Resilience Plans should be based on these principles and contribute to reach these objectives.¹⁵

The Conference on the Future of Europe should also constitute the opportunity to re-think the EU economic model and governance, to be based on going 'beyond GDP' and building an inclusive and fair 'European well-being'. A reform of the EU economic governance, the European Semester, the mandate of the ECB, the EMU and EU own-resources, is urgent in order to ensure that social justice goes hand-in-hand with economic competitiveness, and that people's well-being is the objective of economic

¹³ *ETUC Action Programme, Par. 20-21.*

¹⁴ *ETUC Action Programme, Par 22.*

¹⁵ *ETUC Action Programme, Par 22; Revised ETUC Statement on the second COVID-19 wave: Emergency measures and recovery strategy. Statement adopted by the Executive Committee at the meeting of 9-10 December 2020; Social Europe should be at the centre of the Conference on the Future of Europe.*

policies.¹⁶ To master the digital and green transitions, reforms must also allow the EU to build an effective “open strategic autonomy” to strengthen its industrial value chains and reduce its dependence on foreign suppliers while working towards a fair and rule-based international trade. The Conference should address the necessity to ensure that lifelong learning and the right to training become a reality for everyone in Europe. It should outline the need for a fair and sustainable European agenda for migration, globalisation, international trade, and external and neighbourhood policies.

In the context of the Conference, it is also of paramount importance to avoid initiatives or demands that would reinforce the internal market’s dominance in the EU’s policy framework and foster negative internal market integration by giving precedence to the freedom of services, establishment and capital over trade union and social rights.

Institutional matters

The Conference on the Future of Europe will also discuss crucial institutional matters. It is of paramount importance that the ETUC participates in those discussions, on the basis of the objectives defined at the Vienna Congress. These include the need to push for greater transparency in the functioning of the EU (in particular the Council); institutional reforms at EU level aimed at reinforcing institutional, social and economic democracy and participation; reinforcing and promoting the communitarian and integration-led approach, which was at the basis of the European project, to counter the re-nationalisation of the EU decision-making process based on the inter-governmental approach.¹⁷ Depending on the developments, the ETUC will consider in due time the different scenarios for the Conference (including the possibility of Treaties changes) and will update and better define its plans on how to achieve ETUC priorities and objectives where necessary, while maintaining an ambitious and forward-looking approach.

For years the ETUC has been pushing for a Social Progress Protocol as a priority for the trade union movement. At the ETUC Congress, we have reiterated the need for a Social Progress Protocol to be included in the Treaties to guarantee that workers’, trade union rights and social rights take precedence over economic freedoms in the event of a conflict.¹⁸ For this reason, it is crucial that if the Conference on the Future of Europe discusses the possibility of Treaty changes, then it should include the proposal for introducing a Social Progress Protocol to the EU Treaties. The ETUC will consider the need to update the trade union proposal for a Social Progress Protocol.¹⁹

The Conference also represents an opportunity to push for the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and to link the achievement of the Rights in the Pillar with the Treaty objective of the European Union as a “social market economy, aiming at full employment and social progress”²⁰. The aim is to ensure the consistency of EU policies and initiatives with that objective, including by a potential inclusion of the Pillar in the Treaties. The fleshing out of the concept of the social market economy with a reinforcement of the role of the Pillar would also work to ensure a proper rebalancing of the existing EU economic governance instruments, including the Two Pack, Six Pack

¹⁶ *ETUC Action Programme, Par. 92 and 93. See also Revised ETUC Statement on the second COVID-19 wave: Emergency measures and recovery strategy. and ETUC position: An EU Economic and Social Governance for a prompt, strong and sustained recovery. Adopted at the virtual Extraordinary Executive Committee Meeting of 9 June 2020.*

¹⁷ *ETUC Action Programme, Par. 15 and 34.*

¹⁸ *ETUC Action Programme, Par. 19, 22, 34, 201 and 340.*

¹⁹ *It will be important to assess whether the ETUC proposal for a Social Progress Protocol dating back to 2008 should be adapted. ETUC Proposal for a “Social Progress” Protocol (clause/declaration), 2008.*

²⁰ *The EU “shall work for the sustainable development of Europe based on balanced economic growth and price stability, a highly competitive social market economy, aiming at full employment and social progress, and a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment [...]”. Treaty on European Union, Art. 3.*

and Fiscal Compact. The ETUC will further discuss on the way in which these objectives should be delivered and the necessary safeguards.

The enforceability of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union should be strengthened and the Conference should be an opportunity to reiterate the need for the EU to respect its legal obligation to accede to the ECHR, to introduce a legal obligation in the Treaties for the EU to also accede to the (revised) European Social Charter and its Protocols, as a means to submit the EU legal order to external scrutiny in terms of human rights compliance, and to press the EU to ratify the relevant international, ILO and European human rights instruments, including the Istanbul Convention.²¹ The ETUC will also promote the establishment of a chamber for labour and social law in the European Court of Justice and European Court.²²

The ETUC defined its Position on the Commission's initiative for the enhanced use of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in the social field (the 'passerelle clause') in October 2019. In the framework of the discussions in the Conference, ETUC should reiterate this position. In particular, the main messages from the ETUC are: "*a) to proceed with the activation of the 'passerelle clause' in the Social Policy Field but to do so with caution and with full respect for the role of European social partners and their agreements, b) to include in the Council decision implementing the 'passerelle clause' a non-regression clause, c) Social partners should be involved in the decision to activate the 'passerelle clause' on the case-by-case basis, d) Adopt an incremental approach beginning with the adoption of the 'general passerelle clause in Article 48(7) TEU' in the framework of Article 19 TFEU (non-discrimination). This will help us to establish the extent to which the use of 'passerelle clauses' renders decision-making more efficient*".²³ Fully respecting that taxation policy is primarily a national competence, the ETUC in general supports the move to Qualified Majority Voting also in the area of corporate, capital and environment taxation²⁴ and own resources.

In the context of the Conference, it is also necessary to open a discussion on the much-needed improvements to the European Union's decision-making processes with a view to ensure increased transparency and accountability, and to guarantee the full respect of the Rule of Law.²⁵ The ETUC will also need to take a stance on other institutional matters that might arise in the framework of the Conference, including amongst others the 'Spitzen-candidates' process and the introduction of transnational lists for determining the composition of a limited portion of the EP, and will work to enhance transparency in decision-making processes, reinforce the communitarian approach and strengthen the powers of the European Parliament and the European political dimension.²⁶ Further discussion will be required to assess the trade union position and priorities on additional institutional issues that may arise.

Mobilisation for the Conference

The European trade union movement will need to mobilise at European and national level to ensure that trade union priorities are taken up in the Conference on the Future of Europe.

²¹ ETUC Action Programme, Par. 230. *ETUC resolution on rebalancing the EU approach to fundamental rights*, adopted by the Executive Committee, 10-11 March 2015.

²² ETUC Action Programme, Par. 178.

²³ ETUC Position on the Commission's initiative for the enhanced use of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in the social field (the 'Passerelle clause'), October 2019.

²⁴ ETUC Position on the Commission's initiative for the enhanced use of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in the social field (the 'Passerelle clause').

²⁵ *Social Europe should be at the centre of the Conference on the Future of Europe*.

²⁶ ETUC Action Programme, Par. 15, 34, 93, 98 and 105,

It will be important to exploit all tools and opportunities of discussion that the Conference will offer to push the trade union priorities and objectives. These include the plenary at EU level, the assemblies and official events at EU and at national level, the possibility for trade unions to organise events and initiatives under the patronage of the Conference, and the digital platform that the Commission will develop to foster citizens' participation. During this period, it is also necessary to outline, as much as possible, to trade union members and workers, the trade union vision for a fairer European Union, one which delivers for working people.

As anticipated, the European Commission will set up a digital platform for the Conference. The ETUC will be vigilant that the platform is not used in a way to bypass representative organisations. Instead, it should be a means by which representative organisations, such as trade unions, can better mobilise their constituencies, put forward ideas and proposals and support them in the debate. Some steps have already been taken in this regard. The ETUC should seize this opportunity and be prepared for this exercise.

It is of great importance to ensure high visibility for the trade union demands and proposals in the Conference's framework. A communication strategy will be defined and implemented around the main trade union priorities and initiatives for the Conference.

To reach the abovementioned objectives, a strong mobilisation from the ETUC and all its affiliates will be necessary, including by organising initiatives at EU and national level, but also at local/sectoral/workplace level, by engaging with the digital tool developed by the Commission, by supporting the trade union priorities towards decision-makers, by engaging actively in the communication strategy. It is necessary to ensure that the trade union vision and priorities are proposed and advanced strategically and in a coordinated manner.

The continuous cooperation and coordination with the Workers' Group in the European Economic and Social Committee is of paramount importance and will be ensured before and during the Conference. Cooperation and alliances with other civil society organisations at national and European level will also be explored and developed so as to promote our objectives and priorities for the Conference, starting with organisations of which the ETUC is a member, such as the European Movement International (EMI), the Civico platform, and the Alliance for the Social Pillar.

Next steps

The ETUC will continue to engage with the EU institutions to push for the trade union priorities to be included in the preparation of the Conference and to ensure the recognition and promotion of the specific role of social partners. The Portuguese Presidency and the European Parliament can play a key role in this respect. Social partners should be permanently included in the works of the Executive Board and in the preparation of the Conference. Conference's events and initiatives at European and national level should respect and promote – and not undermine – the role of social partners. The ETUC Secretariat will keep affiliates informed about any developments.

The ETUC will establish a specific Working Group on the Conference on the Future of Europe, composed of one representative from each interested affiliate. The WG will meet periodically before and during the Conference. The members of the Working Group will act as contacts points for the different organisations, to ensure the necessary exchange of information and coordination in the initiatives and actions on the Conference at various levels.

Before and during the Conference on the Future of Europe:

- a) The Working Group will better define the trade union demands on the basis of the priorities defined in the Resolution and the mandate of the Executive Committee;

- b) The WG will be responsible for coordinating trade union activities in relation to the Conference at European and national level;
- c) The ETUC Secretariat will send to the WG frequent updates on the developments in the process, requests for actions and proposals for initiatives;
- d) The WG will discuss developments and positions on issues that might arise in the framework of the Conference;
- e) The WG will coordinate initiatives and activities on the ground and the trade union inputs to the digital platform.

The ETUC will work with affiliates in the Working Group to ensure coordination and mobilisation at different levels on the key priorities of the trade union movement and to develop and implement a coordinated communication strategy. The ETUC Secretariat will organise European-level events during the Conference to highlight trade union priorities for the future of Europe after discussion with the WG.

ETUC affiliates will be required to:

- a) Participate in the work of the Working Group;
- b) Organise initiatives at national, local and/or workplace level and mobilise members to promote the trade union priorities for the Conference;
- c) Contribute to support trade union priorities in the digital platform;
- d) Participate in the definition and implementation of the communication strategy.