



8th EUROPEAN UNION, LATIN AMERICA AND CARIBBEAN TRADE UNION MEETING

Panama, 2 and 3 October, 2017

Panama Declaration

The 8th EU-CELAC Trade Union Meeting, organised by the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas (TUCA) and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), is being held in Panama, to prepare a stance for the upcoming Summit of Heads of State and Government.

The Meeting provides an opportunity to reaffirm the unity and solidarity of the trade union movement in both regions, to share views on the social, economic and political situation and the perspectives and aspirations of workers. Latin America and the Caribbean, like Europe, find themselves in a complex situation in the midst of the many crises which are affecting the planet. The workers of the world are facing a new wave of attacks on their rights and achievements. The austerity agenda, which was imposed in developed northern countries, now reigns supreme as a panacea for the rest of the world. In spite of the failure of these policies in Europe, governments in Latin America and the Caribbean still persist in applying austerity measures, cutting social investment, implementing new employment and social security reforms, with the supposed aim of ensuring that the countries meet the demands of a global economy.

We can identify an ideological, political and cultural battle, in which neoliberal discourse is using the financial crisis to justify reforms and adjustments which entail backtracking with respect to rights and which serve to prop up an unjust and exclusive system. This situation can be observed in both Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean, where the intention is to blame social protection systems, wages, collective bargaining and other governmental social welfare policies for the economic problems the countries are facing and their consequent impact on the working classes and more vulnerable sectors such as women, young people and ethnic groups.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, we see the renewed popularity of a discourse which seeks to blame social policy for the economic crisis and affirm the supposed idea that it - and social security in particular - is no longer sustainable, on the basis of manipulations which point to cutting entitlements as the only possible solution for enabling the state to maintain fiscal responsibility, thereby compromising the government's ability to fund social policies. We have to challenge this discourse by highlighting the real problems: the tax structure, which in most countries is regressive; public debt which is used as a tool for financing capital; the lack of diversification in the productive matrix of the countries in the region - where there is a reliance on particular commodities, along with monetary and exchange rate management.

The natural disasters which have recently battered various Latin American and Caribbean countries reveal all too starkly the gravity of the environmental crisis, and the real and urgent need to tackle it. We call for the strengthening of social and economic relations to promote socio-ecological balance with community involvement and participation, hence developing technologies to prevent climate change and desertification. It is our belief that humanity's shared assets - biodiversity, water, seeds, forests, energy and knowledge - should not be exploited for private gain but used responsibly for the common good. We unequivocally reaffirm the urgent need to step up trade union action in both regions to secure effective agreements to fight climate change. We emphatically reject the United States government's withdrawal from the Paris Agreements on Climate Change.

Economic austerity and the erosion of Democracy

First in Europe, and now in Latin America and the Caribbean, we are seeing the imposition of adjustment and austerity measures and labour reforms which are seriously affecting the working conditions and employment and social rights of workers. The severity of these measures varies significantly from one country to another. In some countries, democracy and civilised values are under attack. Attacks on human rights and on the progress made with regard to gender equality and equal opportunities, the criminalisation of social protest, a crackdown on collective action by trade unions, restrictions on the right to strike, among other things, are becoming increasingly commonplace in both regions. Other expressions of authoritarianism such as racism, xenophobia, misogyny and hostility towards migrants and refugees are on the increase in a number of European countries and are now becoming apparent in Latin American countries.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, after almost two decades of social and political processes to increase inclusion and extend democracy, we are witnessing how a radical conservative offensive, which combines the neoliberal economic model, described above, with a conservative and reactionary policy action, is threatening the region's democratic political systems.

Brazil is an extreme example. Its elected president was deposed by an institutional-parliamentary-media coup, which has resulted in the worst social regression in the past 70 years, dismantling labour rights and social security, freezing social spending for 20 years, backtracking on agrarian reform, environmental protection and inclusion policies covering gender, race and young people. Furthermore, authoritarian and antidemocratic discourse is becoming more radical, criminalising social and political organisations, creating a litigation culture around social leadership and increasing repression and violence against social movements. So, having been a global reference in terms of social progress over the last two decades, Brazil has now, as a result of the coup against the president Dilma Rousseff, become a role model for the global right wing in terms of the violation of workers' rights and the international labour standards established by the ILO.

The coup in Brazil epitomises the plan of the global right wing, which is to work in league with national capitals and large corporations to impose its agenda of maximum gain for the minority and maximum exclusion for the majority. More specifically, the impact of labour reform in Brazil goes beyond mere labour relations; it represents the most serious attack on the Brazilian social protection system, having been developed during the last 15 years of progressive government, and which, with the reform, is now moving towards job insecurity as a result of an excess of 100 measures introduced by the reform. It is an unjust, misogynistic and racist reform which runs counter to the social justice budgets that characterised previous progressive governments. Furthermore, the impact of the coup not only bodes ill for human rights guarantees in other countries in the region, but it is also detrimental to social the progress exemplified by the drive towards regional integration, which has been fuelled by experiments such as Mercosur, UNASUR and CELAC.

In other countries in the region, such as Argentina, Paraguay, Peru, and Guatemala, where policies are being rolled out which are weakening and reducing the democratic character of the country, the governments are pressing ahead with a strategy of curtailing rights, in line with the global modus operandi, thereby exacerbating the problems of unemployment, instability and greater social exclusion for the majority.

It is with deep concern that we observe the erosion of civil, political and social rights in Argentina, where the government is ignoring the internationally agreed resolutions and conventions on human rights, displaying alarming signs of repressive policies, persecuting trade union leaders, social leaders and indigenous peoples in particular, and stigmatising young people and any social groups which express dissent. Two months after the forced disappearance of the social activist Santiago Maldonado, and almost two years after the imprisonment of Milagro Sala, we condemn the deterioration of the quality of democracy in the country.

We once again warn of the systematic violation of human rights in Mexico and, two years after the forced disappearance of the 43 Ayotzinapa student teachers, we are still pressing the Mexican government to conclude its investigations and identify those responsible.

Over recent months, significant progress has been made in the search for a solution to the armed conflict which Colombians have had to endure for the last 5 decades. We express our strong support for the peace process in Colombia and welcome the agreement between the ELN and the government. We demand full compliance with the Peace Agreements and reject any form of intervention designed to derail this process.

In recent years, and in 2017 in particular, Venezuela has become a serious cause of concern for the region and the world, due to ongoing political conflict, violence in the streets, the deteriorating social situation for the population as a result of high inflation, speculation, shortages and stockpiling (particularly foods and medicines), and their effects in terms of loss of life and economic and social damage. For trade unionism in both regions, it is vital that democracy, freedom of association and human rights be respected to enable Venezuelan society to progress. We condemn the use of violence by any political representative; violations of human rights must be investigated and those responsible punished.

The international community must encourage responsible and fruitful dialogue between the opposition and the Venezuelan government. We regret the breakdown of the talks called by the government of the Dominican Republic and led by former Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero with support from the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. It is imperative that political dialogue be resumed and real agreement reached to guarantee Democracy and Peace for our brothers and sisters in Venezuela. We reject any kind of sanctions such as those imposed on Venezuela by the United States. Similarly, we reject any other measure taken by a government or group of governments which does not contribute to the resolution of the conflict in Venezuela.

In Europe, austerity policies have led to a grave social situation in a number of countries because of major labour adjustments whose imposition was opposed by workers. At a political level, the traditional mainstream parties have lost ground to populist and xenophobic forces which oppose immigration and advocate leaving the EU. The 'leave' vote in the UK Brexit referendum and the refusal of many governments to cooperate with the EU in a joint response to the influx of refugees has also cast doubt on the integration project embodied by the EU. While in recent months the far right's expectations of electoral success have been thwarted in Austria, the Netherlands and France, its strength remains a matter of serious concern, as it is now represented for the first time in the German parliament, where it holds 94 seats.

The worst of the economic and financial crisis may now be over, but the people are still feeling the social effects. Unemployment rates are still very high - over 10% in five member states, 21% in Greece and 17% in Spain - with young people being particularly hard hit. Although employment rates have risen, job instability and temporary employment are also on the increase.

The ETUC is putting forward proposals for the Social Europe which we are calling for. It demands that the so-called Pillar of Social Rights proposed by the Commission be made stronger and that European legislation be introduced guaranteeing equal pay for equal work. The attacks on citizens' and workers' rights in some countries such as Poland, Hungary and Turkey have been condemned by the ETUC and its affiliates, who are demanding respect for freedom of expression, association and the right to non-discrimination.

In the face of an increasingly complex international scenario for workers, trade unionism in Europe and Latin America, under the umbrella of the ETUC and the TUCA, must play an increasingly active role, resisting attacks on its achievements, mobilising its forces and developing alternative agendas for fighting back. In both Latin America and Europe, the work of organising, representing and protecting workers is vital if we are to guarantee democracy and expand the rights of society as a whole.

It is also vital that we promote innovative forms of national and transnational trade union action. And that we take action against the global corporate model and, in particular, against the value chains which enable multinationals to maximise their profits. What is needed is joint union action which uses international instruments such as the International Framework Agreements (IFA) designed to protect workers' interests across all a multinational company's operations, the ILO's MNE Declaration, the OECD's Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises and the UN's Guiding Principles for MNEs, recognising the limitations of these instruments and seeking ways to enforce corporate human rights obligations, such as the adoption of a Binding Treaty on Corporations and Human Rights in the UN.

The dynamics of wealth accumulation, a phenomenon which has become more widespread over recent decades, have promoted and aided the process of financialisation in the global economy and are destroying the environment and the Welfare State. Similarly, tax avoidance and evasion, along with tax havens, contribute to increased inequality, hinder sustainable development in countries, increase poverty and expand the power of corporations and multinationals. The best way to combat these dynamics is to strengthen the democratic system.

We are launching an appeal for action in response to the global refugee crisis, which has seen more than 65.5 million people - the great majority from developing countries - forced to leave their homes to escape violence and economic and environmental disasters. Migrant workers play a key role in the economic and social development of our countries. We strongly oppose the demonisation and persecution of migrants, and we reaffirm the obligation to ensure that their rights as workers, and their human rights in general, are respected.

EU-Latin America and the Caribbean summits: persistent shortcomings

In spite of all the declarations and action plans which have been adopted, the achievements of the bi-regional summits still fall short in terms of concrete results for the societies of both regions. Other than the regular two-yearly meetings, we note a standstill and even some backtracking with regard to the important role which vital agendas such as democracy and human rights, integration and development should play.

Taking stock of the last two years, since the last meeting in Brussels, we note that the problems faced by workers and inhabitants in both regions have worsened. Given the balance of economic, social, environmental and political components, which were already in short supply in the region in recent years, the prospects of achieving sustainable development are now practically inexistent for the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. An economic model which is economically, socially and environmentally predatory is emerging, destroying the few achievements made in terms of social and environmental protection. This is very much the case in Brazil, where national and transnational companies are being attracted as a result of the dismantling of laws and the institutional framework established over decades of state policy development.

Bi-regional integration or a new restraint mechanism

Over the past two years, we have witnessed the paralysis of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) process, which has been hampered by the short-sighted attitude of the conservative governments which have blocked the possibility of developing an integration process with a strategic vision to represent the region as a whole. The CELAC could make an important contribution to identifying common solutions to the region's economic and social problems and to constructive and respectful dialogue with the EU and other regional blocs. However, we note that the majority of Latin American and Caribbean governments are quick to align themselves with the dominant blocs and adopt international stances which impede integration and undermine sovereignty and self-determination in the region. Therefore, we reaffirm the concern of the Colombian trade union organisations and express our opposition to Colombia's accession to the OECD, which has been used by the Colombian government and business leaders in their refusal to address the serious situation with regard to human rights and freedom of association, among other things.

Following the election of Donald Trump in the USA, the world has entered a new and more disturbing period of turmoil, deepening the economic and financial crisis, fuelling conflict and wars in various parts of the world and threatening the minimal international consensus reached on issues such as Climate Change or migration. It is with troubled gaze and condemnation that we watch the escalating tension between the United States and North Korea. Against this backdrop, the role that regional blocs such as the European Union and the CELAC can play, for humankind as a whole, will be very important in maintaining a world which is not beholden to the interests of a single power or group of powers. In the case of Latin America and the Caribbean, being able to maintain a vision that makes provision for the region's economic and political diversity along with its cultural plurality is essential if it is to be an international player capable of impacting the destinies of both the region and the world at large.

APPEAL FROM TRADE UNIONS

The European, Latin American and European trade union movement, convened by the ETUC and the TUCA and meeting in Panama on 2 and 3 October, presents the following proposals and demands to the Heads of State and Government.

First of all, we call on the Governments to convene the postponed summit so that the commitments of the EU-CELAC action plan can be addressed.

In a spirit of mutual solidarity, we express our conviction that international trade unionism must play an important role in the current global economic situation, as well as in relations between the EU and CELAC.

We repeat our opposition to policies intended to make workers and communities bear the burden of resolving this new phase in the crisis of world capitalism. Against the background of the dismantling of workers' and social rights and attacks on democracy, the trade union movement affirms its commitment to unified mobilisation and action against those who seek to support owners of capital and corporations, and also against governmental policies that are creating poverty in their countries.

We share our commitment with social movements, human rights defenders, environmentalists, community leaders and journalists, in unified defence of the fundamental democratic freedoms of expression and association and the right to protest.

We demand that governments in both regions show a real commitment to progress and that they adopt policies which protect and create jobs and guarantee decent wages and high-quality social care as effective mechanisms for combating exclusion and poverty. Guaranteeing full enjoyment of the freedom of association, collective bargaining and the right to strike, as instruments for extending rights and reinforcing true democracy, is an obligation for all the states, as they pledged in the ILO conventions. We repeat our call for the rights enshrined in the Ibero-American Social Security Convention to be extended to all EU-CELAC countries.

We urge governments in both regions to push through effective measures to combat fraud, tax avoidance and the illegal activities of tax havens. We also call for such measures to be included in a specific chapter of the bilateral and bi-regional commercial and economic partnership agreements.

The EU and the CELAC must promote bi-regional policies which encourage sustainable development, fair trade and decent jobs, in reaction to the radicalisation of the free trade agenda which is worsening social and environmental deficits. The existing Partnership Agreements have brought little benefit to the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean and efforts to renegotiate them only seem to be widening the imbalances between the two regions. The instruments relating to labour issues have been relatively ineffective in protecting workers and guaranteeing their rights in the face of the attack to which they are being subjected.

We warn of the need to move quickly to conclude the EU and MERCOSUR Agreement in December in the context of the 11th Ministerial Conference of the WTO, the purpose of which, for President Michel Temer of Brazil and Mauricio Macri of Argentina, is to exploit this event and put on a show about the region's participation in world trade and, for Europe, to send President Trump a message about the continued existence of multilateralism.

The ETUC and the CCSCS (Cono Sur Trade Union Organisations Coordinating Council) have jointly made clear to the negotiators the need for a just and balanced agreement which takes into account the differences in development between the two blocs, and within them, through special and differential treatment and by demanding safeguard clauses for fledgling industries. Furthermore, they have restated the need to include a Social-Labour Chapter, which the trade unions have been proposing since the start of the negotiations. We also warn of the risk involved in signing an agreement of such importance against the background of the completely illegitimate government in Brazil and the integration crisis facing the peoples of the Cono Sur.

In this last phase, the negotiators have been forced, as a result of action by the trade unions, to initiate dialogue regarding the content of the agreement (while secrecy remains an issue, we can highlight the fact that the agreement is highly unbalanced, with the inclusion of topics which are highly sensitive for relatively less developed countries) and the speeding up of processing in areas such as Intellectual Property, Public Procurement, state-owned companies, rules of origin, e-commerce, etc. All issues which the WTO is promoting for its 11th Ministerial Conference in December 2017, and which present developing countries with the dilemma of an increasingly asymmetric division of labour, which perpetuates and consolidates Latin America and the Caribbean's historical status as a provider of raw materials and an importer of technology and high-valued-added goods, thus condemning its population to insecurity and degraded living conditions.

The European and Mexican trade union movement has, on numerous occasions, expressed the need for the ongoing renegotiation of the EU-Mexico Agreement to be concluded with transparency and with civil society participation on both sides.

With regard to the existing Agreements between the EU and Central America and between the EU and Peru and Colombia, we note that the mechanisms for civil society participation in the monitoring of these agreements have thus far been insufficient. The so-called "Assessors' Groups" (DAG) have not yet been put together in some countries, and in others the unions have been excluded or the groups which have been set up are not fully representative. Furthermore, the members of these assessors' groups do not have the resources to carry out their activities.

We also repeat our demand for compliance with the Fundamental Conventions and Standards of the ILO with regard to relations between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean.

Finally, it is our hope that the next EU-CELAC Summit will put in place a credible and feasible programme of commitments to move the relationship between the two regions forward to the benefit of the countries and their social majorities. The official Declarations, together with those relating to Civil Society and Trade Unions, set out a series of political measures and actions which are to be implemented. Abandoning the rhetoric and ceremonial summits and taking concrete action on behalf of the societies of Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean is long overdue.