

Val Duchesse Social Summit – 31 January 2024

Speech of Esther Lynch, General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation

Dear President von der Leyen,

Dear Prime Minister de Croo,

Dear Vice-President and Commissioner,

Dear Deputy Prime Ministers and Minister,

Dear colleagues,

Social dialogue, said Jacques Delors, is *“one of the foundations of a democratic society.”* It was this conviction that led Delors to convene a summit of trade unions and employers’ organisations as one of his first acts as President of the European Commission.

This was the meeting of social partners that took place in Val Duchesse on this day 39 years ago.

At the moment of the first Val Duchesse Summit, technological developments were significantly changing the world of work. Against that background, Delors set Europe on the path of social progress: he developed instruments and processes so that change could happen in a managed way through social dialogue between trade unions and employers’ organisations, also at European level.

The first Val Duchesse summit also marked the end of a crisis between the Social Partners at European level. The parties committed to initiate a process of dialogue. It took months, but at the end of 1985 the Social Partners agreed a first joint union-employer position at European level on social dialogue and new technologies.

Our return to Val Duchesse today for another social summit could not be more timely. This Summit gives to all of us the opportunity to renew our joint

commitment to social dialogue: we must defend and reinforce social dialogue and collective bargaining as fundamental pillars of the European Social Model.

This Summit comes also after the failure of the social dialogue negotiations on telework and the right to disconnect, for which it is now important that the Commission take up the initiative and make a proposal for a Directive.

Social dialogue that does not deliver cannot prevent progress. And, social dialogue that does not deliver cannot become the norm.

The climate and digital transitions are having a profound impact on the world of work. We need social dialogue and collective bargaining at all levels to deliver results to improve working conditions and ensure social progress.

There is the need to decarbonise the economy, but we should ensure anticipation and management of change based on collective bargaining and social dialogue, investments for quality jobs, the right to training without costs for all workers, gender equality and closing the gender pay gap. The alternative is a repeat of the reckless deindustrialisation policies that led to so much industrial conflict in the 1980s.

Delors' vision for social dialogue at the heart of the single market was and still is the answer.

That is why the European Trade Union Confederation welcomed the proposal of the President of the Commission to hold this Social Partners' Summit and we have contributed to the Declaration that we are about to sign.

The declaration includes a shared commitment to work together to deliver concrete outcomes that will lead to stronger social dialogue across Europe and for the full implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

The establishment of an alert system to help address problems and the appointment of a European Social Dialogue Envoy, who will promote and support social dialogue, are important results of this summit.

It will be necessary to match the ambitions for social dialogue with the adequate political and financial support for social dialogue at all levels.

The engagement to work towards a Pact for European Social Dialogue is also of high value.

The Declaration importantly also stresses the role of collective bargaining to deliver improved working conditions and quality jobs, as well as the need to

respect the prerogatives of trade unions and employers' organisations as the actors for social dialogue, including at national and sectoral levels.

As we look ahead to forthcoming institutional term, it is worth recalling that democracy at work leads to increased democratic involvement outside of work. Faced with that rising threat of attacks against democracy, we need to ensure that the foundations of our democracy are strong – at all levels. And as Jacques Delors envisioned, that must include social dialogue.

We need to return to the vision of a social Europe that he set out in Val Duchesse 39 years ago today. This can and must be the moment we start to get European social dialogue back on track. Our common engagement is of paramount importance in this endeavour.

President, in Gaelic we have a word: "*Meitheal*". It means to come together for a common work. Jacques Delors said "*the success of Europe depends on our ability to work together, find common ground, and compromise*".

Let this Summit be the start of our "*Meitheal*".

END

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