

Resolution: Trade Unions' Demands for a Successful EU Enlargement

ETUC Mid-Term Conference 2025



Mid-Term Conference Resolution: Trade Unions' Demands for a Successful EU Enlargement

Twenty years after the largest wave of EU enlargement, millions of workers are still waiting for the promise of decent work, fair wages, strong rights, and real social protection.

Although enlargement has brought economic growth, political stability, and the integration of new democracies into the Union, EU institutions, governments and companies have failed to deliver social justice for Europe's people, fuelling the disillusionment which gives oxygen to nationalist and anti-democratic forces across the continent.

The ETUC reaffirms its commitment to the goal of a united Europe, but stresses that further enlargement must not repeat past mistakes: it must deliver tangible improvements in the living and working conditions of all workers.

The current geopolitical scenario supports the rationale for continued EU enlargement. However, the ETUC believes that EU enlargement must not only be about expanding borders but about extending fairness, dignity, and democracy to every worker in Europe, including through strengthened workers' rights and the full realisation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. For this to become reality, workers must have a voice. Strong and functioning social dialogue is the democratic backbone of a fair economy—and a precondition for a Social Europe that delivers. Yet in too many candidate countries, social dialogue exists only on paper. We call on the EU and national governments to invest in genuine structures that treat independent trade unions as equal partners in shaping reforms. Building and strengthening social dialogue must be central to the enlargement process.

Respect for trade union rights—including freedom of association, the right to organise, bargain collectively and strike—is a cornerstone of democracy and the European Social Model. These rights, must be fully guaranteed throughout the accession process, including the respect of international labour standards. Social dialogue must be genuinely embedded at all levels.

We strongly condemn the actions by governments and employers in candidate countries that systematically violate workers' and trade union rights. These actions can make the path to EU accession more complicated and time-consuming and, if not corrected, might lead to candidate countries not meeting key criteria (the so-called Fundamentals). Current enlargement negotiations must prioritise effective social dialogue and stronger labour rights to ensure decent jobs, good living and working conditions and an overall fair deal for workers and prevent repeating mistakes of the past.

Despite gains in political stability and economic growth, past enlargement rounds have failed to close key gaps in wages, labour rights, and living standards between East and West. Wage gaps between old and new member states remain as high as 4:1. These differentiations not only stifled upward convergence but also contributed to mass emigration from Central and Eastern Europe, worsening labour shortages and undermining local economies—a reality the EU can no longer afford to ignore.

Multinational companies were also contributing to segmentation of the EU labour market, seizing on low wages but highly productive workforces to reduce their costs and increase their profits. Many companies were and are still applying double standards when it comes to workers' rights: adhering to meaningful social dialogue, collective bargaining and worker participation in their country of origin, while completely disregarding these features in new host countries and engaging in union busting. This also underlines the need to prevent social dumping and fraud. Such practices further emphasise the need for increased cross-border trade union cooperation and collective bargaining coverage to ensure that the new wave of enlargement is good for workers and not just a bounty for companies. To this end the principle of "equal pay for work of equal value" along the supply chain must become a reality. To create upward social convergence, sustained low wage and labour flexibility policies must be reversed to stem emigration and avoid further exacerbating labour shortages that hamper economic development in candidate countries. If the EU is to deliver a fair deal for all workers and a level playing field for companies, alignment with the entire EU social acquis, along with its effective implementation, in particular of Directive (EU) 2022/2041 on Adequate Minimum Wages, must be in place. Moreover, collective bargaining at sectoral and cross-sectoral level must be strengthened as workplace level negotiations have limited impact on increasing wages and social standards.

Subsidies and tax breaks for multinationals must be linked to social conditionalities and the acceptance to engage in meaningful social dialogue. Similarly, public procurement rules should incentivise companies to comply with the European Social Model, conclude collective agreements and respect trade union and worker participation rights. Social conditionalities should also become a standard feature when disbursing EU funds, independent of whether the recipient is a company or a national government.

The ETUC therefore demands:

- No Single Market access without full alignment to the EU social acquis and effective social dialogue. Single
 market access for countries without adequate social dialogue and social standards must be rejected as
 it would entrench wage differences, hamper convergence and reproduce the dynamics observed since
 2004. Social Europe must be the foundation—not the afterthought—of the next enlargement. The EU must
 make effective social dialogue, trade union rights, broad collective bargaining coverage and respect for
 international labour standards not only a cornerstone of accession negotiations but also a precondition for
 EU membership, as already foreseen in chapter 19 of accession negotiations (on social policy and employment). In addition, social scoreboards should be used to assess progress on these aspects.
- Differentiate between social and civil dialogue. Civil society organisations (CSOs) play a crucial role in democratic societies but are no substitute for trade unions. On occasion, CSOs have been instrumentalised to simulate social dialogue. In contrast to civil dialogue, social dialogue is the EU Treaty-based forum to negotiate work-related issues, labour market policies and industrial relations. It is the domain of employer organisations, trade unions and – where it is tripartite – governments.
- Harness Pre-accession Assistance and the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans, Ukraine
 and Moldova to expand Social Europe. In many candidate countries, trade unions operate under strict financial limitations and legal restrictions, while employer organisation structures and social dialogue remain underdeveloped. A portion of these multi-billion Euro funds must support social dialogue and capacity building
 for genuinely independent trade union and employer organisations in candidate countries. Social conditionalities and public procurement rules must be respected in allocating these funds.
- Build comprehensive public services and social protection systems in line with the EPSR. We demand the
 strengthening of public institutions that contribute to social justice and democracy. This includes investments in labour inspectorates, tax administrations, independent judiciaries to address corruption, fraud,
 social and fiscal dumping which, if not dealt with, increase inequalities, undermine democracy and the very
 European project.
- Further enlargement must be accompanied by reforms of the EU, to balance economic integration with
 a stronger social dimension, to streamline decision-making and prevent the paralysis caused by national
 vetoes, but also to ensure fair mobility and equal treatment to safeguard workers against exploitation. Existing legal instruments such as the revised Posting of Workers Directive must be fully implemented in all EU
 Member States, especially as regards the list of core minimum terms and conditions; new tools such as the
 European Social Security Pass (ESSPASS) and limits in subcontracting chains should also be introduced.
- Better prepare candidate countries to cope with the EU Green deal agenda, with just transition planning and funding. With the adoption of the EU Green Deal, the EU has set ambitious objectives that require a rapid and profound transformation of the entire economy. This unprecedented shift entails important compliance and investment challenges for entire regions that could undermine the cohesion objectives if the EU budget would not provide adequate support to areas in need. Not doing it, would expose workers to disruptive change when candidate countries will have to comply with EU rules while putting additional pressure on cohesion funding.
- Foster inclusive public debates on enlargement, engaging the general public, workers and independent trade unions in meaningful debate and enabling their effective participation in the process. In candidate countries, the EU should shift from its technocratic and increasingly geopolitical approach to greater grassroots engagement.

This enlargement must mark a new chapter—one of true convergence, where no worker is left behind, no trade union right is negotiable, and the values of Social Europe are no longer a promise, but a practice.



