

Speech by Luca Visentini, General Secretary at the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC)

TUC Congress

Brighton, 11 September 2016

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Dear comrades of the TUC, dear friends,

It's a pleasure and an honour to be here today with you and speak to your Congress.

This is not an ordinary Congress. We have just faced the greatest shock to hit the United Kingdom and European Union in recent times: Brexit.

We fully respect the result of the referendum, but let me be sincere: we are not happy with it. We don't want and don't need British citizens and workers to leave the European Union.

Outside the EU, British workers risk having less protection, and without British workers European workers will face the same risk.

Trade union history teaches us a clear lesson: united and in international solidarity workers and trade unions are stronger, divided they are weaker.

So I want to be clear: even if Great Britain has decided to leave the EU, the TUC will always be a member of the ETUC – we will never give up on our unity and on our common struggles.

We still don't know what's going to happen – when exactly the British government will trigger article 50, where the negotiations will lead us, and if this is the definitive destiny of the UK or there is a way back.

But there are two things we are sure about: that we will fight to make certain that workers' interests, both in the UK and in Europe, are not damaged by Brexit – and to ensure that trade unions are involved in the negotiations.

We have been assured by the President of the European Commission that the ETUC will be properly consulted – and we expect the British government to do the same with the TUC.

European unity brought important benefits for workers: peace, prosperity, social inclusion – and the tools to achieve them: the single market, the fundamental freedoms, the European social model.

It's very likely that political and business elites will try to keep all the advantages that come from the EU for themselves, while doing all they can to weaken social protection and workers' rights.

There is a clear attempt to misuse Brexit to undermine social Europe.

This is an additional reason to be united, for the TUC and ETUC to agree a common position and common proposals – and to coordinate our participation in the negotiations.

We warmly welcome the TUC's campaign to maintain the rights of continental European workers here in the UK. Similarly, the ETUC will call on EU governments to give British citizens abroad the right to remain.

Brexit is not the only emergency we have in front of us – the European Union itself is in danger.

The economic crisis, high unemployment, social exclusion – besides the refugee crisis, terrorism, rising xenophobia and populism: all these challenge citizens' trust in the future.

Europe is blamed for all the problems now facing people, although most of the responsibility lies with decisions taken by governments.

Distrust is also widespread among workers, and sometimes even affects trade unions.

That's why we in the ETUC have decided to launch a broad discussion on the Future of Europe.

Our continent is at a crossroads: either it is reshaped and reformed into a different, fairer Europe, or it is at risk of collapsing.

Change is urgently needed, and the European trade union movement wants to contribute to it.

There are three main areas where together we can build a Europe for the people.

The first one is the economy.

Our economies are still facing recession, deflation, and high levels of unemployment – austerity, cuts, structural reforms have shown themselves to be the wrong way out of the crisis.

Current economic dogmas have led to a collapse in investment, demand, wages – rising inequalities and social divergence between countries, sectors, and categories of workers.

It's high time to change our economic model – we need to restore a progressive economy, an economy for people's prosperity.

The first essential is public investment – investment for infrastructure, innovation and research, education and training, sound and efficient public services, sustainable development.

All economies that are performing better have triggered their recovery through public investment, and all international financial institutions are finally recognising this. The Commission's President Investment Plan almost failed because it was mainly based on private investment.

Even international trade agreements – like TTIP, CETA and TISA - which were based purely and simply on the interests of capital and business, are falling one after the other: we will continue – with your support – to campaign against these so-called trade deals.

We have to destroy the myth that public investment and well-functioning public services and social protection systems increase debt and wreck the economy – the exact opposite is true.

And we are building up alliances – within and outside Europe, particularly with North American unions – to get a radical New Deal for our economy.

The second pillar of our strategy is wages.

In recent years, wages have been depressed almost everywhere – minimum wage and collective bargaining systems have been dismantled – pay inequalities and gaps have risen.

Another myth lay behind this: that the European economy can compete on labour costs, and that reducing wages can increase productivity and competitiveness.

Actually productivity went down together with workers' purchasing power – and we know the reason: the European economy is not led by exports, it's based on internal demand – 70% of our products remain in Europe, and if we don't boost workers' purchasing power, there is no hope for the economy.

The ETUC is therefore ready to launch a major campaign for a general pay rise for European workers.

A campaign which will be based on higher minimum wages, on living wages, on strengthening and restoring collective bargaining.

A campaign based on upward wage convergence in multinational companies across Western and Eastern Europe, so that we put an end to social dumping and exploitation of migrant workers, and reduce inequalities.

We know that increasing wages is the biggest challenge for trade unions – and we know the difficulties you face in the UK on this – but we are convinced that this is our core business, if we want to strengthen our role and increase our membership.

The ETUC is on your side in your fight for better living wages in the UK, and we are sure you will be actively part of our European campaign.

Finally, the third pillar for our action is a more Social Europe.

This means a future for youth, equality for the most disadvantaged, and better pensions for all – means efficient unemployment protection – means minimum incomes to fight poverty and social exclusion – high quality public services, starting with health care – health & safety and education and training rights – means mobility of work that ensures equal treatment and portability of social protection.

It means new rights for young, precarious and non-standard workers – in the most innovative as well as in traditional sectors of the economy.

Social Europe means upward convergence towards better social standards – and means no derogations and opt-outs from fundamental, social and trade union rights.

Social Europe also means social dialogue – and social rights having the same importance as economic freedoms.

This is the European Social Model – a model that has been an example to the rest of the world – but now is under attack and misrepresented as an obstacle to economic progress.

Societies with a strong social model, efficient social dialogue and industrial relations, and inclusive social cohesion (like in Scandinavia) do better economically.

So let's fight for social Europe – this is the moment to do it – this is the only way out of the crisis – and to give people hope.

The European Commission has launched an initiative to develop a European Pillar of Social Rights.

We know President Jean-Claude Juncker is sincerely committed to achieving it – he needs our help, since some governments, political forces, and European bureaucrats are trying to undermine him.

We want this Social Pillar to be applied to the whole of Europe, not to the Eurozone only. And we want the UK to be part of it – to continue benefiting from the European Social Model.

We have at least two-and-a-half years of negotiations in front of us – we have to exploit them to get better social protection and rights for British and European workers.

It won't be an easy battle.

But this is our duty – we have the best proposals and tools to win it.

We can make it – if we stand united, if we fight together for our values and goals.

We, the ETUC and the TUC, have the future in our hands – let's make it real!

Thank you very much! Have a great Congress!