

*Minutes of the virtual meeting of the ETUC Extraordinary Steering Committee of 9 March 2021*

Participants : Lajos MAYER, President; Agostino SICILIANO, Secretary General; Jessica MONTIEL, Project Coordinator and Henri LOURDELLE, Special Advisor to FERPA who took the notes.

The ETUC President, Laurent Berger, opened the session by welcoming the members attending the meeting and gave the floor to Luca VISENTINI, Secretary General of the ETUC, for his Communications.

Luca justified the holding of this meeting by the need to obtain a mandate on several points. However, he began with some information:

- The appointment of a new CISL General Secretary
- The Commission's initiative with the publication of its action plan on 4 March
- The Conference on Europe published today: the 3 European Institutions (Council, European Parliament and Commission), having reached an agreement after a year of controversy.
- On budgetary policy, the general derogation clause (derogation from the Stability Pact) is suspended until 2023, which may pave the way for a change in the EU's budgetary policy.
- The legislation on salary transparency was left out by the Commission on 4 March, which makes it after 140 days, instead of the first 100 days promised. The parliamentary procedure can start.
- Also the disability strategy was published.
- The tripartite EU agency Eurofound has a new director. He is a former labour minister, pro-trade union and pro-tripartism. He comes from Bulgaria.
- As for the Agency for Safety at Work, the appointment of a new director is underway.
- The same applies to the OECD Directorate. But the ETUC remains vigilant, as the Austrian candidate is opposed to the trade unions
- Finally, the Secretariat hopes that the Mid-Term Conference on 6 and 7 July in Lisbon can be held face-to-face or, failing that, in a "mixed" format. But everything will depend on the evolution of the pandemic.

After this sharing of information, the General Secretary addressed the two main issues in view of the next ETUC Executive Committee meeting on 22 and 23 March.

Firstly, the current building. Several solutions had been considered to make the building sustainable in the long term. Firstly, a 'light' renovation of the current building, which is neither comfortable nor sustainable. However, it turned out that this was neither realistic nor possible. A second option considered was a "radical" renovation, which would mean leaving the building and renting another building during the work. This solution also proved to be unfeasible from a financial point of view (44 million euros just for renting another building). Finally, a third solution was considered, that of selling the current building and moving into a new building to rent or buy.

19.5 million, with the possibility of renting another building in the same street at number 9, which is being renovated. There would be the possibility of developing 3 parking areas with two entrances: one for staff and another for "outsiders" who would like to access the auditorium or the cafeteria, for example. The rental for 3 to 5 years would be at the price we currently pay at No. 5.

In summary:

- 1st step the sale of the current building
- 2nd step: move to another building
- 3rd step: rent and/or buy. We will have 3 to 5 years to think about this.
- The purchase price would be 63 million euros with deduction of the rent paid, plus a bonus of 1 million for the restoration and VAT exemption, if purchased (gain 2 million).

The offer is valid until the end of March.

After the Executive Committee meeting there will be the MSI AGM. VGO, which rents the last 4 floors, has not yet decided what it will do.

The second important point discussed was the situation in Russia. This is very difficult. There are human rights violations, activists are locked up... On 12 February the ETUC produced a first statement which was criticised by its affiliates as being too weak. It was intended to be as balanced as possible after consultation with the CRPE and the Russian unions. But our assessment of the situation differs significantly from that of the Russian unions. For the ETUC, it is a question of making a difference between protecting the demonstrators and democracy and not mixing it with the positions of the Russian dissident, Alexei NAVALNY. At the CRPE school on 25 and 26 February, there was no discussion on the subject. We will see if the CRPE Steering Committee of 10 March will discuss it. The question that is being asked today is whether there should be a new declaration at the ETUC Executive Committee meeting on 22 and 23 March or whether the discussion is sufficient.

The President then opened the debate.

Regarding the building, the organisations thanked Luca for his explanations. Many felt that there was no other option than to leave the current building. However, what concerned several organisations was the speed. How can they consult their bodies in such a short time? The financial structure is not easy to understand either. The federations and/or organisations that are there would prefer to remain linked to the ETUC. Some of them have visited several other buildings, they will only stay in the same building as the ETUC if the price is competitive.

With regard to Russia, even if some organisations are aware of the power relations that exist within PERC, all the interventions consider that the ETUC must have a strong statement on the defence of democracy and the right of freedom of expression. Others expressed their regret at not being able to discuss the substance of Russia, but all agreed on a stronger statement at the next Executive Committee. Others also insisted on the need for good coordination within the ETUC on Russia. Some called for a working group on international issues. Indeed, some emphasised that there was certainly Russia, but there was also China and its stranglehold on Hong Kong or Mercosur.

To conclude on this international point, the news was given that the charges against Lula that had led to his imprisonment had been dropped.

There was also an intervention on the Stability Pact. The ETUC must develop its position on the debt. It must launch a discussion on this subject.

The floor was then given back to Luca for his response.

Concerning the building, if an option is not taken quickly, the situation will be very difficult afterwards because the market is very fluctuating in this area. The prices offered are very competitive. We need a building, not only with offices, but also with an auditorium, meeting rooms, rooms for hybrid meetings (which is not possible at the moment), a decent cafeteria... The rent will be a bit lower than what we are paying now. As far as the financial consequences for the ETUC are concerned, it is a zero-sum operation. It is not a question of asking the International Trade Union House to take a decision to buy, but to sell number 5 and rent number 9. Buying today seems very complex. The costs of renovating number 9 will be broken down according to need. The money from the sale of number 5 will be set aside. However, it will be necessary to ensure that all floors are occupied. Today, this is a Recommendation of the Management Committee, for the Executive Committee.

With regard to Russia, the Secretary General took note of the criticism. He is open to presenting a new statement, which will be prepared by the Secretariat and the Presidency. Concerning a working group on international issues, it would be difficult to convene it before the next Executive Committee. Before Vienna, an International Affairs Committee had been proposed. Also the Secretariat is ready to come back to this, but it has to be clear what kind of tasks this Committee should deal with. Because the Committee, which existed, had to deal with international trade as well, and this aspect dominated.

Finally, the Secretary General agreed with an evaluation of the ETUC on debt. Without a total reform of the budgetary rules, the debt will be unsustainable. The fear of additional debt had led governments to use only 50% of the SURE.

The President then proceeded to the vote to give a mandate to the Executive Committee concerning the building. The vote was unanimous minus two abstentions, the FNV and LO-S

The following organisations took part in the debate: Industrie All, LO-S, CGIL, FGTB, FNV, Solidarnosc, UGTE, DGB, CFDT

The President then gave the floor back to the Secretary General to introduce the item on the Conference on the Future of Europe. The purpose of the debate, based on the General Secretary's note, was to prepare a Resolution to be submitted to the next Executive Committee. The Secretary General first of all recalled some points of information on the course of the Conference, on which the three European Institutions had finally agreed. The first plenary session would take place on 9 May, Europe Day, after the Social Summit in Porto on 7 May. The Conference will last one year instead of the two years initially planned. There will be a mid-term plenary session in the first half of 2022, under the French Presidency of the EU. The social dimension is an integral part of the Conference. The social partners will be involved at all stages. Decentralised events

will also take place to allow for a fuller participation of citizens. The social partners currently have an observer status in the Executive Council that will manage the Conference. But the ETUC continues to press for permanent involvement and not "on an ad hoc basis" as is currently indicated. We need to have a set of demands for the Conference and a roadmap for trade union mobilisation. The ETUC will focus on social issues. It will make suggestions on institutional issues, for the defence of democracy. It will defend the rule of law. It will propose new ideas for changes in the Treaties:

- Integration of a Social Protocol with concrete results. On this point, it has the strong support of the European Parliament.
- Integration also of the European Socle of Social Rights, but not in the Social Protocol part. This is in order to reinforce concept 3 of the Treaty, which speaks of a "social" economy, with a clear tool for implementation through the ETS. But not all ETUC members agree to have a binding ESDP.
- Strengthening the European Social Charter
- Reinforcement of the principle of qualified majority voting, particularly on social rights, social protection and taxation.
- Create a "social chamber" at the ECJ to ensure that workers' rights are defended.
- Establish a more democratic process with the election of the Commission Presidency by the citizens

We will have to show our capacity to mobilise by organising activities to defend our positions, including in the workplace.

A working group will be set up, composed of one representative per interested organisation, to coordinate the different activities organised by affiliates.

Following this presentation, the President opened the debate.

Many organisations consider the Secretary General's document positive and essential. However, some of them, notably all the Nordic organisations, are opposed to the inclusion of the European Socle of Social Rights in the Treaty, they do not want to make it a binding instrument. They do not want to give additional powers to the European Parliament. They want to remain within the strict framework of the Treaty, so they are also opposed to the extension of the areas for qualified majority voting. For them, the Social Protocol must remain our priority. They also do not agree with transnational lists for the European elections. On the other hand, other organisations believe that the social dimension must be strengthened, and that it is therefore essential that SEDS be included in the Treaty, in addition to the Social Protocol. Funding should be provided for. It is important to guarantee rights for all European citizens. The European Union must be binding on social aspects and the "social" market economy.

It is important to focus on institutional issues, which cannot be excluded, while adding that one cannot have European mechanisms without the agreement of the Parliament.

As far as the Conference on the Future of Europe is concerned, it will be a starting point. Its objective is to address all the most important issues that concern workers. The ETUC must have clear and ambitious objectives.

It is important that trade unions are represented at all levels. It must take the opportunity to give visibility to its own work programme.

Other demands were also added, such as the need to invest in skills to cope with change. Or the need to focus on health. And, more specifically, with regard to health care, what we want to see - or not delegated at EU level. We need to be clear about what we want (a truly social Europe) and what we do not want (more market).

Some organisations recalled that the Social Dialogue is essential and they found the idea of setting up a working group during the Conference relevant.

The Secretary General of FERPA also intervened in the debate to say that he found the document interesting. He commented on Luca's reference to "the most vulnerable" and insisted that the most vulnerable part of the population, the retired, should be given more visibility. They have paid contributions for their pension throughout their careers so that they are not "vulnerable" when they retire... It is a question of solidarity: to allow them to have the right to live a dignified life with a dignified pension. We need more solidarity in this area.

In his response, the ETUC General Secretary recalled that the one-year duration of the Conference was too short and that this duration would probably be extended. But this is due to the fact that the European institutions have wasted a year arguing. Lobbying must continue to include all social and environmental elements and to have a real involvement of the social partners. They should not be invited "if necessary", but permanently. Opposition comes more from some Member States than from the Commission or the European Parliament. We must ensure that our participation is valued and not diluted. On the institutional aspects, the ETUC is opposed to a top-down approach. Pressure must be brought to bear to change blockages in the Treaty, such as the unanimity rule, which, as one organisation pointed out, is a source of paralysis. The ETUC must have a list of demands and then adopt a tactical approach. In other words, we need to see how to influence the outcome. The bar must be set very high and, as the ETUC General Secretary added, "Let's be ambitious". With regard to the "Chamber of Labour", which some people seem to dispute, perhaps we need to clarify what we mean by this and therefore better formulate this demand. Regarding the "qualified majority", we already have Congress documents on this demand. As for transnational lists in the European elections, this may not be our priority, but we must be able to express ourselves on this point. Coordinating the ETUC, the European Economic and Social Committee and the national organisations is indeed the aim of the working group that we want to create. In conclusion, the Secretariat will prepare a Resolution for the Executive Committee including all comments.

The following organisations intervened in the debate: FH, TCO, CISL, ETUCE, SAK, UIL, STTK, FO, UGTE, CFDT, FERPA, EPSU, CC. OO, DGB

The President then gave the floor to Liina CARR, Confederal Secretary, to present the ETUC's first assessment of the Action Plan for the implementation of the EDS, published by the Commission on 4 March.

This is an initial assessment, from which several points emerge, which will be taken up and clarified at the next meeting of the Executive Committee on 22 and 23 March. For the Commission, it is more of a "Social Handbook for Europe" than a binding instrument, even though half of the Socle concerns social protection and health care.

More worrying for the ETUC, there is no binding instrument foreseen for the moment: it is the Member States that are competent for the implementation of the 20 principles of the Socle. The Action Plan is based on 3 general objectives:

- 78% of the population aged 20-64 should be in employment by 2030
- 60% of adults should participate in learning activities each year by 2030
- The number of people at risk of poverty should decrease by at least 15 million by 2030

Under Principle 4 of the European Foundation, the Commission is presenting a recommendation on active support for employment, following the COVID 19 crisis.

The Commission has already presented several actions stemming from the European Base, such as

- The European Skills Strategy (Principle 1)
- The Strategy for equality between women and men (principle 2)
- The EU Action Plan against Racism (principle 3)
- A package of measures to support youth employment (Principle 4)
- A proposal for a directive on adequate minimum wages (Principle 6)

In the same week as the publication of the Action Plan, the Commission intends to

- Adopt a proposal for a directive on pay transparency (principle 2)
- A new disability rights strategy for the period 2021-2030 (principle 17)

The next EU actions in 2021 will concern, among others

- The European Child Guarantee (Principle 11)
- A new strategic framework on health and safety at work (Principle 10)
- An initiative to improve the working conditions of people working via digital platforms (principles 5 and 12)
- And an action plan for the social economy.

Concerning health care, a proposal will be made to launch a reflection on the financing of social protection and the idea of a European Social Security number is being revived to encourage mobility. The social scoreboard is revised to enable the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

However, there are several shortcomings (non-exhaustive list):

- No proposals to strengthen labour inspections
- SURE is not indicated as a permanent reassurance
- No discussion on precarious work
- No mention of the need for rapid implementation of the Transparency and Predictable Working Conditions Directive (published in 2019)
- Despite what has been announced, there is little on health and safety at work.

- There is no mention of pension adequacy and the welfare of the elderly
- No legislative initiative on minimum income...

The ETUC is pushing for an ambitious joint declaration by the social partners and the European institutions at the Porto Summit (7 May). It will organise a Summit on 6 May. It is important that the Action Plan is adopted by all Member States and social partners.

Following this presentation, the ETUC President opened the debate.

Generally speaking, the organisations took note of the document submitted for discussion, but they noted that although the Commission's messages were positive, the Action Plan had difficulty in taking initiatives to resolve the real problems. For example, legislative expectations are not included in the document, even if the blocking of certain Member States must be taken into account. More ambitious proposals are needed. What is also missing is clarity on access to and use of European funds. Its weakness is that the main part of the Action Plan is left to the Member States. There is a worrying situation: how will the action plan be implemented? How will the objectives be achieved?

Elements on ecological transition are also missing. Worker participation is weak. There is a need for a stronger framework. There is no mention of collective bargaining either. Also missing is the recognition of COVID 19 as an occupational disease. Also missing is the recognition that there are not enough health care workers and the need for more funding. In summary, there are some points on which the Commission wishes to act, but these are mostly "recommendations" and this Action Plan is mostly what is happening now. We need a strong statement from the ETUC. A review of the EU 2020 Strategy would also be necessary.

The Secretary General of FERPA also intervened, welcoming the work done by the ETUC for this meeting, which covers everything that has already been discussed. As he had already tried to say in his first intervention, he returned to the difference between an adapted pension and social assistance. There is a need for more solidarity.

The following organisations intervened in the debate: FO, UIL, FNV, CITUB, CSEE, EPSU, UNI, FERPA, LO-S

In conclusion of the debate, Liina CARR thanked the organisations for all the observations made, which were useful for revising the document to be discussed at the Executive Committee. If there were any written contributions, they should reach the Secretariat by the end of the week.

The ETUC General Secretary concluded the meeting by thanking the organisations present for their active participation. He then provided some clarifications. He indicated that the two documents discussed would become draft resolutions, but that, given the time available until the next Executive Committee meeting, it would be impossible to send them out 10 days before the meeting.

Returning to the Action Plan, he reiterated that where the document is weak is that its implementation is a matter for the Member States and some governments are opposed to an action plan. The President of the Commission herself did not want this Action Plan to be particularly ambitious either. There is a risk that in Porto the Member States will not want to sign the joint declaration on the Action Plan.

Finally, the Secretary General informed the Executive Committee of the death of the President of LO Norway at the age of 53, which he had just heard about. A minute's silence was observed.

Henri