

ETUC Mid-term Conference

Rome, May 29-31, 2017

Address by Carmelo Barbagallo on behalf of CGIL CISL UIL May 29, 2017

I wish to thank European Commissioner Thyssen, Minister Poletti, President Damiano and Prof. Moavero for having opened the ETUC Mid-term Conference with their contributions.

Luca Visentini put on the table the issues and challenges we face and which shall be discussed also by trade unions with a view to sharing a common position, which must be based on proactive proposals because inactivity does not pay.

A few days ago, another terrorist attack killed also children and teenagers.

We and all Europeans must provide a joint response to the heinous Manchester attack. It is not enough to condemn cruel acts such as these one. We need to understand and react united.

I would also like to recall the recent tragedy of migrants in the Sicilian sea last week, with dozens of victims, including many children. 1,500 people have died at sea since the beginning of 2017. This, too, is a European tragedy: irrespective of the place in which this occurs, coordinated European policies and actions are needed.

The same holds true for the attack on the Christian bus in Egypt, so close to Europe. It cannot leave us indifferent.

Faced with these massacres, I wish to emphasize that a European security policy - which, undoubtedly, is currently a priority shared by governments, united in this fight - must be based on a new Euro-Mediterranean policy. A policy that must not oppose migrations and seal borders, because such a policy has no future. Conversely we need a development policy and co-development of both regions, based not only on values and rights, but also on common growth opportunities. A policy made of alliances, dialogue and cooperation.

The outcome of the G7 Summit held in Taormina was disappointing and its failure is before us to be seen. The new US Administration put on the brakes and slowed down progress on many topics at the negotiating table.

No agreement was reached on central issues such as migration and the environment; the questioning of the need for multilateral trade agreements; the threat of a return to protectionism and bilateralism in our transatlantic relations.

Europe, however, needs to react strong and united.

Undoubtedly, over the last decades, the path towards the European Union and the stability of institutions have ensured peace between European countries, as well as democracy and respect for the EU fundamental values, starting from human rights, solidarity, diversity and dialogue.

Today, however, the context in which we can promote a renewed European policy has changed. We are faced with growing inequalities between countries; unfair distribution of wealth; an increase in absolute poverty and also in-work poverty, because wages are low and discontinuous; unemployment affecting mainly young people and welfare systems which cannot ensure adequate social protection to everybody.

We are among those who are disappointed with the European Union, because we participated in the construction of the European project and currently the original project of gradual integration is increasingly weakened by misguided policies.

Citizens' discontent and mistrust in EU institutions are widespread because the economic and financial austerity policies implemented to react to the crisis have had a devastating impact on the social fabric of our countries.

A model of economic development has prevailed, characterized by precarious work, minimal social protection and downward competition among the European countries themselves. Hence we are trapped in a perverse spiral: with a view to being competitive on world markets, we need to reduce wages and worsen working conditions. Therefore social and environmental dumping has become a factor for competition. We have borne the brunt of this situation in terms of rights, economic and social cohesion, quality of work, social security and today also political stability and resilience of our countries.

The recurrence of populism, xenophobia, extreme nationalism and dangerous protectionism are a kind of defense against this Europe which is unable to improve its citizens' living and working conditions, as well as unable to defend us from the external attacks and to protect our products and the quality of production, even at environmental level, from global competition.

The answer, however, is more and not less Europe. The answer is greater economic, social and political integration.

The debate opened by President Juncker's White Paper on Europe's future will give us the opportunity of comparing different strategies and visions. The Italian trade union movement has always looked to and participated in a Union federal process carefully and positively and will continue to do so. Today, however, we know that we must operate by stages and that we must find common solutions to common problems. One thing is certain for us: individual countries alone cannot rise up to the challenges we face.

Rights and values are not negotiable and no compromise is possible on the EU fundamental principles. Nevertheless the European identity, from which a new concept of citizenship arises, is a mosaic of cultures that cannot be dispersed and wasted - a mosaic that evolves because our societies evolve, become more open and no longer closed.

We are convinced that the economic and social dimensions are closely interwoven and that Europe's future goes hand in hand with greater economic and social convergence, for a balanced distribution of wealth and for a political agenda pursuing the same goals.

We need a new economic agenda focusing on public investment designed to promote growth and create better jobs. This agenda must also initiate the reform of the Stability and Growth Pact and outline a European industrial policy going well beyond national borders and practices. We also need a climate change strategy seen as an opportunity for a new production model based on quality, innovation and research.

We need a new social model, based on the real, effective and widespread implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights promoted by the European Commission. Listing the new Principles is not enough. We urge the Commission to take legislative action to implement the Pillar throughout the Union. Only an upward convergence of our social standards will ensure fair competition and cohesive growth between European countries.

The societies recording fewer social imbalances are the most resilient to economic shocks – it is an economic and not an ethical fact!

The social dimension must become an integral part of the EU governance system.

We know all too well the new challenges of employment, namely the jobs of the future; the digitization impact; industry 4.0; the impact on contractual models; the role played by social partners; the new and old safeguards to be guaranteed and extended. We cannot think, however, that these great changes take place without the unions' active involvement. We are ready to play a role in putting forward and analyzing proposals, but European governments and institutions must be ready to create structured channels of dialogue and exchange of views, without undermining social dialogue and collective bargaining at all levels.

We also need a political agenda for the whole EU, not just about security or migration policies. Faced with the crisis situations in the world we cannot compete on foreign policy: we need to speak with a single and authoritative voice and have the ability to influence decisions.

Last but not least, we need a new, more democratic and more inclusive EU decision-making process, starting from local communities and regional governments - often more exposed and vulnerable to the distortions of an unfair and unjust market - and involving the national Parliaments more directly.

These days of debate in Rome should serve us, as unions, to be more determined, to share goals and policies and be able to have influence at national and European levels. We have a great responsibility towards the workers we represent.

I wish us good work.