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ETUCE Statement on the European Pillar of Social Rights

Adopted by the ETUCE Bureau on 18 May 2017

Following the unveiling of the European Commission's initiative introducing a [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), the European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE)¹, which represents 131 education trade unions in Europe, i.e. more than 11 million teachers from all levels of the education sector in 49 European countries, demands European leaders to **fully endorse the Pillar** with the final aim of **applying universally the principles embedded therein**, as the last occasion for the sustainability of EU economic growth, social wellbeing, and political stability. The European Pillar of Social Rights, hailed by European Commission President Juncker as an ambitious initiative paving the way for the **establishment of a Social Europe**, is composed of key proposals including a [Communication Establishing a European Pillar of Social Rights](#), and follows the European Commission's [Reflection Paper on the Social Dimension of Europe](#) and the [White paper of the Future of Europe](#), presented at the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome.

Laying at the very foundation of the Pillar, the European Commission sets out 20 principles and rights built around three main categories: **Equal opportunities and access to the labour market, Fair working conditions, and Social protection and inclusion**. By endorsing the Pillar of Social Rights, European leaders are to reaffirm their commitment to uphold the fundamental rights and principles of the European Charter of Fundamental Rights and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, implying that economic growth is not an end by and of itself, rather an instrument to ensure that all citizens across Europe enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives, based on decent works and high-level social standards.

ETUCE is deeply concerned about the major political, economic, and social concerns the EU is challenged with. These are rooted in **a climate of rising nationalism, dissatisfaction, and citizens' distrust in the European project**, especially in those countries that have been subject to policies and politics of austerity leading to cuts in pay and social protection, rising unemployment, and inequalities. Through this statement, the ETUCE echoes the message of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) affirming that the EU is now on its *last chance to deliver and to create a more social Europe*.² In ETUCE's view, it is time to show that the EU cares about its people's need to fulfil their potential in dignity and equality.

Therefore, ETUCE welcomes the proposal for a framework aimed at **upwards convergence of social rights in Europe** and the long-awaited return of the social dimension into the European work. This action should, however, be developed with the **involvement of the social partners at all levels** to the fullest extent, and be driven by an implacable **political**

¹ ETUCE is a Social Partner in education at the EU level and a European Trade Union Federation within ETUC, the European Trade Union Confederation. ETUCE is the European Region of Education International, the global federation of teacher unions.

² ETUC Press release, [No future without a more social Europe](#), 26 April 2017.

will and integrated legal mechanisms ensuring that the Pillar fully comes to fruition. Drawing from the pre-existing EU *acquis* and legislation on social issues³, as well as the division of competences as designed in the EU Treaties, the Pillar deepens the scope of action for guaranteeing more social protection for European citizens, and provides recommendations for the effective implementation of these rights at the national level.

While fully supporting the principles and rights advocated for in the European Pillar of Social Rights, including the right to inclusive and quality education, training and life-long learning for all, equal opportunities, gender equality and social dialogue, ETUCE warns that the Pillar's stated objectives face **challenges in their delivery, and expresses concern over the visible frailty of the mechanisms** set in place for committing EU governments to uphold the rights and principles contained therein.

We believe that **social rights are not optional** and trust that European institutions share this principle. As the current negotiations around the historical breaking away of one of the EU Member States demonstrate, an *à la carte* European Union is not an acceptable solution when it comes to social rights. The 2008 financial crisis and the following crumbling of the economic and social situation in Europe have proven that the EU has no choice but to move forward with policies that foster upwards convergence in economic *and* social standards. The stepping stone of social Europe must consist of a clear signal for all concerned actors that equal social rights are not negotiable for the survival and further prosperity of the European Union. As such, we urge European decision-makers to **revise the current proposed Pillar and to consolidate its legal framework and enforcement mechanisms and to render it compulsory for all European Member States.**

The European Pillar of Social Rights is currently designed as an enunciation of principles and rights, and subsequent guidance towards their translation into national legislation. Therefore, **the Pillar does not constitute a fully legally-binding proposal.** We are all too aware of **some governments' tendency to push the implementation of the principles stated in Pillar backwards**, as the risk of sanctions is non-existent and incentives to comply are weak.

While the affirmation of the rights and principles included in the Pillar is a welcome symbol of progress, we fear that the current proposal **lacks the strength required to emerge unscathed from the negotiation process.** Indeed, the European Pillar of Social Rights is still in its infancy. Its final form will be debated and modified by many stakeholders before it can take effect – provided this final version of the Pillar is adopted by the European Parliament and the Council through the process of interinstitutional proclamation.

Therefore, we anticipate and warn against **attempts aimed at watering down the content of the European Pillar of Social Rights.** Should these endeavours succeed, we would be left with a vaguely-phrased, hollow Pillar, and unfulfilled promises. This eventuality would be disastrous, not only for the credibility of the European project, but also for the standards of living and working conditions of its citizens.

Time for incremental progress has expired. The European Union, Member States, and citizens are shaken by the political, economic, and social crisis. When one fire is put out, another is lit. The way out of this vicious cycle necessitates a **strong vision and ambitious reshaping of social and economic policies**, in order to break away from the drawn-out

³ The European Pillar of Social Rights follows and complies with sources of law such as the [Revised European Social Charter of 1996](#), the [European Code of Social Security](#) of the Council of Europe, as well as relevant international conventions, recommendations and protocols, issued by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations.

paradigm of primarily financial growth-oriented policies. Reaching the 'Social triple A' sought by European Commission President Juncker entails the unwavering implementation of a clear social agenda. ETUCE firmly believes that this goal requires a clearer, more detailed European Pillar of Social Rights.

- **Education, training and life-long learning**

As a strong advocator and campaigner for [Quality education for all](#), ETUCE welcomes that the Pillar addresses, in its first stance, the **inalienable right to universal access to quality and inclusive education**. ETUCE welcomes the European Commissions' recalling of Article 14 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, a move towards a more positive narrative of high quality public education. In ETUCE's view, this is the basis for providing the opportunity to learn to all children, young people and adults, regardless of their socio-economic background. Equity must be the hallmark of education quality. To this end, education should be publicly financed and regulated.

ETUCE is concerned that the overall decrease in investment in education and training in the EU as a whole has seriously undermined the right to quality education for all, with a detrimental effect on equality and social inclusion across the EU. Moreover, despite some progress in terms of post-crisis recovery, there is evidence that investment in education continues to lag behind as individual Member States appear reluctant to commit to boosting education investment. ETUCE considers it a paradox that an **area of public investment seen as central to driving recovery continues to suffer, with the potential to impact on growth and employment**. Failure to address the issues results in a vicious circle of extended recession, continued pressure on social protection spending, and crowding out investment in education and staff capital development. The sufficient, predictable and sustainable allocation of resources as an investment into Europe's future is in the interest of both society in Europe and its economy.

While fully respecting the subsidiarity principle and the division of competences as of Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), and the European action on encouraging inter-governmental cooperation on education, **ETUCE calls on the European Commission to bolden its recommendation, the scope and changes introduced by the Pillar in the education domain, by urging Member States to protect and to increase public investment allocated to education**. ETUCE believes that the right to education for all can only be achieved through a rights-based approach and strongly demands the EU institutions to encourage governments to take all necessary measures to ensure sufficient revenue for investing in high quality public education for all, including through the European Semester governance coordination.

ETUCE regrets the significant disconnection between the importance of quality education for all, the European Commission's commitment to social dialogue, and the current experience of several education trade unions across Europe, that report the lack of meaningful social dialogue on education reform and policy making at national level. The Pillar recognises that the implementation of the rights and principles embedded therein strongly depends on the quality of social dialogue within the Member States. Embracing the commitment of the EU to deepening social dialogue as central to the delivery of social rights, ETUCE particularly takes note of the equivocal wording regarding the role of social partners in the implementation of this first right to quality education for all. Therefore, **ETUCE calls on the European Commission to clearly and uniformly state the importance of a meaningful education social dialogue as a prerequisite to achieve quality education for all**.