



SPEECH

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31 January 2024

Val Duchesse Social Partners' Summit, Brussels, 31 January 2024

ADDRESS BY FREDRIK PERSSON, PRESIDENT OF BUSINESSEUROPE

Dear President von der Leyen,
Dear Prime Minister De Croo,
Dear Deputy-Prime Ministers Dermagne, Vandenbroucke and Clarinval,
Dear Vice-President Schinas,
Dear Commissioner Schmit,
Dear colleagues,

First of all, I would like to thank President von der Leyen for having convened this summit as well as Prime Minister De Croo for hosting us in the venue where the interprofessional European social dialogue initiated by Jacques Delors was born, 39 years ago.

Jacques Delors' whole life was devoted to economic and social progress. To put an end to the economic stagnation of the so-called Eurosclerosis years¹, he devised a master plan: the 1992 Single Market programme. The ambitious transformation he had in mind entailed huge challenges for European companies and workers. He wanted to have their backing and wanted to shape the social dimension of this Single Market with the European social partners.

BusinessEurope shares Delors' conviction that social progress requires a well-functioning economy. For us, social partnership has to be an economic and social partnership. There can be no thriving companies without thriving employees, nor satisfied employees in unsuccessful companies.

Yesterday, the latest GDP data was released. Unfortunately, it confirmed that Europe's economy is stagnating and lagging behind key competitors. EU GDP grew by 0.5% compared with 3.1% for the US.

Without growth and a strong industry, Europe will be weaker. There will not be sufficient investment in the green transition. There will be less jobs and less welfare. Europe will be less able to support Ukraine and less able to manage the next pandemic. It is crucial that employers, workers and policy-makers join forces to improve the situation.

BusinessEurope is committed to doing so. We pledge to constructively work with the EU institutions and with European trade unions in order to put Europe back in the top spot to work, live and do business. But our pledge comes with the clear message that social progress can only be built on competitiveness and growth.

¹ The years of economic crisis and then stagnation in the 1970s and early 1980's



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For BusinessEurope, a successful social agenda supports competitiveness, growth and employment in a deeper Single Market. It is an agenda that focuses on making the cake bigger by tackling the labour and skills shortages that are holding us back.

Re-skilling and upskilling is extremely important but will not be enough. Europe's social agenda has to be part of a master plan to stop Europe's deindustrialisation and addressing the other key factors creating investment leakage: high energy costs, excessive regulation and lengthy permitting procedures.

Do not get me wrong. I am not calling for wild west deregulation. Nor am I questioning the green transition. What I am calling for is to flank the Green Deal with an Industrial Deal, in which European employers, workers and policy-makers work in partnership for a green, social and prosperous Europe.

And if we want to foster such a partnership, we need to go back to the fundamentals of "social partnership à la Delors".

The first component of social partnership "à la Delors" is tripartite concertation between the Commission and representative European social partners organisations. A tripartite concertation, which starts with the Commission discussing its overall strategy to dynamize the EU economy (and later, specific proposals to implement this strategy) with European social partners. A tripartite concertation happening at an early stage, so that shortcomings that could prevent reaching the desired goals can be identified. A tripartite concertation leading to balanced and workable proposals.

The second component of social partnership "à la Delors" is an autonomous bilateral social dialogue between representative employers and workers organisations at various levels. An autonomous dialogue that is leading to joint opinions on economic and social issues that are not of the exclusive competence of the social partners. An autonomous dialogue leading to various types of agreements at different levels, including legally binding agreements at European level when it makes sense and is possible.

This autonomous bilateral social dialogue can only thrive if employers and workers have the necessary space to engage with each other. It entails risks. Success can never be guaranteed. But it is a fundamental component of our European social model to be valued.

This is in a nutshell, the European economic and social partnership to which BusinessEurope reiterates its commitment in the declaration that will be signed later this afternoon.

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