

There are solutions to the crisis

On the 6th and 7th of March 2014, the EESC Workers' Group organised an extraordinary meeting in Athens on the occasion of the Greek presidency of the Council of the European Union.

The meeting on the 6th of March was devoted to a midterm evaluation of the Greek presidency by Ioannis Vroutsis, Minister of Labour, Social Security and Welfare, with interventions from representatives of the Greek trade unions who were able to give us a presentation of the current social and economic situation in Greece from a trade union perspective.

Yannis Panagopoulos, President of the General Confederation of Greek Workers (GSEE), stated that as an alternative to austerity policies which have only resulted in a humanitarian crisis the memorandum should be replaced with a new framework and group of policies (employment, sustainable primary surplus etc.). Christos Polyzogopoulos, President of the ESC of Greece, noted that, currently, Greece is a social rights Sahara and a suffering society. To overcome this, the Greek ESC's proposal includes measures such as a minimum guaranteed income, access to social services and the reintroduction of collective labour agreements in order to stop the phenomenon of the working poor. Spyros Papaspyros, President of the General Council of the Greek Confederation of Public Servants (ADEDY), condemned the policies of the Troika, stating that they have resulted in the dismantling of the welfare state, the disappearance of public dialogue and, in some cases, in deviations from the Greek constitution.

In order to link the Greek and the Italian presidencies and to prepare the next extraordinary meeting of the Group in Italy, a delegation of the Italian National Council of Economy and Labour (CNEL) presented the priorities of the Italian EU presidency. During the debate, Mr Salvatore Bosco, vice-president of the National Council of Economy and Labour (CNEL), spoke on behalf of the delegation of the Italian trade unions which participated in the extraordinary meeting. Bosco confirmed the concerns about the social and economic situation and the impact of the crisis particularly in Southern Europe. Important contributions were also those of representatives Beniamino Lapadula and Giorgio Alessandrini, who noted that the forthcoming Italian Presidency will provide opportunities to strengthen the economic governance in the EU and to launch ideas to support the development and creation of new jobs.

The meeting of the 7th of March was devoted to the future of democratic governance in the EU and the role of the European Parliament, especially on the eve of the European elections. Participants included MEPs Nikos Chrysogelos (Greens), Sylvana Rapti (S&D) and Nikos Chountis (GUE). Gabriele Bischoff (Workers' Group) and Cristian Pîrvulescu (Various Interests' Group) outlined the action plan for Europe which is currently being prepared. This initiative entitled "Five years to save the Union" will contain in particular a series of proposals to improve the functioning of Europe; this will be the EESC's contribution to the European debate that will take place during the election campaign.

Democratic legitimacy was also the focal point of a debate on the role and functioning of the Troika. Alejandro Cercas, rapporteur of the European Parliament, took the floor to denounce the "social tsunami" caused by the policies of the past that have only seriously jeopardized the achievement of the objectives of the "Europe 2020" strategy.

Finally, participants discussed the way in which Europe, facing the crisis, could establish alternative solutions to austerity policies, since they deteriorate the living conditions of citizens while keeping the economy in a downward spiral of recession. In particular, they strongly criticized the dominance of the intergovernmental method in the fight against the crisis. They stressed the need to strengthen the democratic legitimacy of economic governance by subjecting it to the community method. They also reaffirmed their support for a greater involvement of social partners in the process in order to prevent the recommended reforms from leading Europe towards economic and social disaster.