There are solutions to the crisis

During the extraordinary meeting of the Workers’ Group which was held in Athens on the 6th and 7th of March 2014, George Dassis, President of the Group, was interviewed on the issue of the crisis and possible solutions. "It is in times of crisis that effective governance comes to the forefront. We can talk extensively about appropriate solutions, but the foundation is that we cannot abandon people to their total misery. We must all work to ensure that everyone survives”.

Discussing the issue more practically, George Dassis said that ‘jobs must be provided, especially to the young people, so that they can enter the labour market. To achieve this, we need massive investment; and we need this investment to come from a European level. As States are obliged to continue to apply austerity measures, investment needs to come from the European Union, so that national governments do not find themselves in a difficult position regarding meeting the criteria of the economic and monetary union”.

"We must find financial resources, and we need to look for money where the money is. We have already proposed taxation on financial transactions; this can be a significant source. Currently, the Commission has submitted a proposal that is practically what we had proposed four years ago: with a tax of 1‰, the Union can collect around €57 billion. This could be an appropriate amount to invest. Finally, we must pool the national debt of the States of the European Union. Otherwise we will no longer be able to speak of a united Europe; rather, it will be a situation of 'every man for himself' resulting in 'woe to all', in my opinion.”

European mobilisation for “A New Path for Europe” - Fighting for Investments, Quality Jobs, Equality

The results of the crisis continue to plague the European citizens; unemployment, economic and social uncertainty, inequality and poverty are some of the daily problems that the majority of people face. Boosting the economy and restoring confidence is the difficult task the EU is faced with.

In order to do that, we need massive investments which will aim at sustainable growth. This would include a strong industrial base, good public services, well-functioning states and welfare systems, and innovative research and education.

The numbers speak for themselves: €1,000 billion was spent to save the financial sector; €1,000 billion is lost every year in tax evasion and fraud. An investment of €250 billion would contribute to the creation of quality jobs and, as a result, to a better future for the EU citizens. Were this amount to be invested boldly, it could yield up to 11 million new jobs of high quality. Soon the EU citizens will be asked to vote on their representation in the European Parliament.

ETUC, the voice of the European workers, strongly urges all citizens to support those who promote progression and inclusion for Europe. Only then will we be forging a new path towards a better European society.

Come join us on the 4th of April!

The demonstration is organised by the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and will take place in Brussels.

4th April 2014: Euro-Manifestation in Brussels
Statements by Group II Members in the debate on "Measures for renewed confidence, growth and jobs in Europe"

Georges Dassis, President of the Workers’ Group, asked Ms Lagarde if the IMF was intending to revisit its policy towards EU countries which were experiencing difficulties, in view of its recent declarations to the effect that it had been mistaken on the remedy proposed for overcoming the crisis. Indeed, the IMF’s proposals were tantamount to abolishing collective bargaining agreements and reducing purchasing power in the countries in question. As a consequence, they had reduced populations to a state of dire poverty, a situation corroborated by recent figures from Eurostat.

Mr Dassis then congratulated Ms Lagarde on her statement that the EU would need rules and regulations to make the financial sector more secure and ensure that it once again worked to the benefit of the real economy. However, what about the bankers who were at the origin of the financial crisis and who had never been punished? Had the IMF thought about the penalties to impose on these people and did it have the means to apply them in the same way that it had implemented the tough austerity plans on the EU countries in debt? Lastly, Mr Dassis urged Ms Lagarde to draw inspiration from Nelson Mandela, who had fought for a world where wealth would be shared more fairly, and he called on her to take action along these lines.

Romania had had to push through extremely tough reforms, particularly in the labour market, which had inter alia led to the dismantling of collective bargaining agreements. Mr Dandea then asked whether the IMF really believed there could be an economic system where there would be no more collective bargaining. If that were the case, he would advise the Romanian government not to pursue negotiations for concluding a new agreement with the international Monetary Fund.

On 11 December 2013, the Plenary Session was attended by Prisca Merz, Director of the "End Ecocide in Europe" European Citizens’ Initiative.

Dumitru Fornea spoke of the contradiction between people's desire to live in affluent conditions, which entailed industrial activity based on carbon, and their desire to live in an unpolluted environment. He underlined that the organisers of this initiative were labelling everybody who thought that human progress depended on industrial economic activity as destructive. The idea was more one of seeking a balance between these two schools of thought so as to avoid tipping into one of the extreme positions, which would only lead to anarchy. Mr Fornea concluded by pointing out that there was already legislation at European level dealing with the criminal aspects of damage to the environment (Directive 99/2008). The initiative in question therefore brought nothing new and its value was confined to its educational aspects.
The 21 January plenary session also received a visit from José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission, for the debate on the Commission's 2014 work programme.

**Statements made by Workers' Group members**

Georges Dassis, Workers' Group president, stressed his agreement with Mr Barroso's statement that the efforts to save the euro zone following the crisis caused by the world of finance had been a great success. However, it was the financial operators responsible for the crisis who should have been punished and not the millions of workers who were now reduced to poverty. There should have been banking sector reforms to enable European companies throughout Europe to benefit from fair and uniform financing conditions.

Mr Dassis expressed his regret that Europe had imposed austerity measures during the crisis without taking the necessary measures to promote economic recovery; this had left fertile ground for nationalists who were now calling for borders to be closed and for an end to the solidarity linking European countries.

From now on the Commission should work actively to convince the peoples of Europe that European solidarity was the solution, by being more persuasive, especially vis-à-vis the Council.

Mr Dassis finished his statement by returning to the problem of social inequality, which had been accentuated by the crisis. The real issue was whether Europe would succeed in distributing wealth more fairly by for instance adopting a minimum income to ensure that people living in Europe at least had enough to live on.

Gabriele Bischoff emphasised that the end of the European Commission's term presented the opportunity to take stock of its achievements objectively, identifying the positive aspects of its work as well as those areas where improvements were needed.

In recent years, public perception of Europe had taken a serious turn for the worse. Workers especially were extremely disappointed by the austerity policies applied by the European institutions and their consequences on the working class. The American model recommended by Mr Barroso in the area of labour law should therefore be rejected.

If Europe did not become more democratic, more socially-minded and more fair, nationalists and extremists would gain ground. As a result, the most burning issue at the end of the Commission's term was how to overcome the growing social divisions that were tearing Europe apart.

Carmelo Cedrone agreed that the outgoing Commission's record was not only positive and that certain of its measures deserved criticism. The old post-war rhetoric of fine speeches must give way to a more neutral tone. The Commission had to accept that not all the problems had been solved and explain how Europe could address the challenges facing it.

The main challenge for the EU was clearly still the crisis and its adverse impact on jobs, especially among young people, and the poverty into which it had plunged entire populations. It was in relation to this challenge that the European Commission must provide an immediate and clear response.
21-22 January 2014: 495th Plenary Session

What Ukrainian civil society expects from the European Union

On 21 January, the plenary session welcomed Ruslana Lyzhychko, a Kiev Maidan Square civil society activist, People’s Artist of Ukraine and Unicef Goodwill Ambassador, and Oleksiy Honcharuk, a Maidan Square civil society activist, in connection with a debate on what Ukrainian civil society expects from the European Union.

Statements made by Workers’ Group members

Andrzej Adamczyk mentioned the long months of negotiations between the EU and Ukraine, intended to culminate in the signing of an association agreement. The surprising decision taken in secret by the Ukrainian government to put an end to these negotiations made it clear that the government, which was leading the country towards bankruptcy, had no intention of standing for re-election through democratic means.

The civil society organisations and people of Ukraine should therefore be supported in their fight against the attempts of the authorities to stamp out democracy and civil liberties in Ukraine, which was after all a European country.

The EU’s response to the maelsstrom of the crisis has been ill-judged and slow, leading to the longest recession in its history. Millions unemployed. Millions of young people out of work.

Thousands of businesses folding. A veritable disaster has struck many countries in the euro area.

But why has this happened? The author provides an answer: the primary cause of all of these problems lies in the limitations of EMU, dating back twenty years. We have 17 (...) countries with a single currency – single but not common. A currency left isolated, without a "sovereign".

And the result of this?

1 euro currency and 17 (...) euro-area economic policies! They would have you believe that the fault lies with the euro itself or with the debt, but that is not so! It is the national governments and EU institutions (apart from the ECB) that do not want to add the remaining legs to the euro (EMU) stool. Thus it will be hard to turn things around. The author, however, is convinced that this can be done, provided that it is the will of the (perhaps indignant) younger generation and the general public.

Carmelo Cedrone is a committed European. Member of the European Economic and Social Committee and vice-president of its economic section. Professor of European economic policy at La Sapienza university, Rome. Published author. Mr Cedrone has long experience as a trade-unionist in Italy, Europe and worldwide. He is a husband, father and grandfather. And a champion of young people, rights, fairness, and merit.
Activities undertaken in the context of the Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of the European Union, notably as regards dialogue with civil society

On 22 January, the plenary session welcomed Mr Vytautas Leškevičius, Lithuanian vice-minister for foreign affairs, Mr Artūras Černiauskas, president of the Lithuanian Confederation of Trade Unions, Mr Rimantas Šidlauskas, director-general of the Lithuanian Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Crafts, and Mr Martinas Zaltauskas, director of the Centre for information and support for non-governmental organisations.

**Statements made by Workers’ Group members**

Georges Dassis, president of the Workers’ Group, began by thanking the Lithuanian government for the excellent welcome it had shown members of the group attending its meeting at the Lithuanian parliament, early in the Lithuanian Presidency of the EU. He also used the opportunity to thank the three Lithuanian trade unions for the smooth running of that meeting and gave an especially warm welcome to Artūras Černiauskas, president of the Lithuanian Confederation of Trade Unions (LPSK), attending the plenary session.

Mr Dassis went on to congratulate the Lithuanian Presidency on having brought representatives of the three main drivers of the country’s civil society to the Committee to present the summary of its achievements and recommended that subsequent presidencies do likewise.

Lithuania’s "European" work, he said, was not yet complete. It must continue to work with other European governments to promote social justice and a fair distribution of wealth and to keep the peace. Lithuania must continue to fight with the other European governments to ensure that the European social model remained an example for other continents.

Daiva Kvedaraitė highlighted the positive achievements of the Lithuanian Presidency. Two social employment schemes had been launched: the youth guarantee and the European Alliance for Apprenticeships. The Commission had also adopted a project to stimulate investment in European industry.

With regard to events in Ukraine, Daiva Kvedaraitė asked what the situation was with regard to the penalties facing 200 activists.

Gražina Gruzdienė also referred to events in Ukraine, hoping that civil society would play its part in ensuring that dictatorship did not win the day.

Europe needed to be passionate about always seeking social dialogue, on which there was still progress to be made, even in Lithuania.

To conclude, Gražina Gruzdienė thanked the government team for its hard work in making the Lithuanian Presidency a success.
The meeting on the 6th of March was devoted to a mid-term 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 Polyzoopoulos, President of 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.

Spyridon 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 Lapadula Benjamin and Giorgio Alessandrin, 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 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 leading Europe into an economic and social disaster.
European minimum income and poverty indicators

Own-initiative opinion proposed by G. Dassis and approved during the December 2013 plenary session.

The EESC:

• considers that establishing a European minimum income will help to ensure economic and territorial cohesion, protect the fundamental rights of the individual, guarantee a balance between economic and social objectives and redistribute wealth and income fairly;

• stresses the urgent need to guarantee an adequate minimum income in the European Union under a framework directive and calls on the Commission to undertake concerted action in response to the resolution adopted by the European Parliament in 2011;

• calls on the Commission to examine funding possibilities for a European minimum income focusing in particular on the prospect of setting up an appropriate European Fund;

• calls for further measures to be taken: 1) continuing to pursue horizontal employment targets, 2) setting targets for percentage reductions in the three poverty indicators, 3) setting sub-targets for groups presenting a higher risk of poverty, 4) reviewing the way Member States calculate poverty levels and set their national targets, and 5) ensuring that the Member States renew their commitment to reduce poverty;

• calls for an effective assessment of the social impact of the National Reform Programmes (NRPs) and National Social Reports (NSRs), as well as of the financial consolidation packages;

• calls on the Commission to put forward specific social inclusion recommendations for each country, as part of its assessment of national reform programmes and national social reports;

• urges the Commission in cooperation with the Member States to implement measures of the Growth and Jobs Pact to boost growth, competitiveness and job creation;

• particularly stresses the importance of increasing participation in lifelong learning by workers, the unemployed and all vulnerable social groups and improving their level of qualifications.