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**Vice-president**

**of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC)**

***Inaugural speech***

Brussels, 29 October 2020

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It is a great honour to have been elected vice-president and I want to thank all the members, my group and, in particular, Oliver Röpke, who have put their faith in me. I would also like to thank the CGIL – the Italian General Confederation of Labour - my organisation, which has been my home for 30 years and where I learned and have achieved professional fulfilment.

 I am fully aware of the responsibility of this role, in the difficult period we are traversing, and I will do everything necessary to repay the trust placed in me.

The crisis we are experiencing is unparalleled in European and world history: it is hitting the human race in all corners of the globe and throwing us up against the transient nature of our human lives: a microscopic organism has attacked us, and we are not yet able to defeat it, but we will. For the first time in thousands of years of history, the human race finds itself having to carry out many human and social activities without physical contact, without being in the same place, without direct human relationships. We have learned to live "virtually", and all of this will profoundly, anthropologically change our way of being men and women.

Our generation's challenge is to tackle all this and find solutions.

There is no doubt that the pandemic will leave us with a different, poorer, more unequal world, as the crisis is affecting all sectors of the world's economy.

Almost all of Europe experienced the first lockdown, and the heroes of the pandemic were regarded with admiration. We said that the crisis would teach us to be better people and that this was a great opportunity to change everything that had been shown to be wrong in society before the COVID crisis, all the distortions of an economic system that focused on making profit for the few and left many behind. Now, as we approach a second lockdown, we ask whether this will really happen. Of course, the EU has done a great deal, with all the investment plans, but it has yet to put jobs and people at the heart of its policies.

I believe that the EESC can play a key role in putting people and jobs at the heart of policies. The reasons underpinning its creation in 1957 are of great relevance today: it was decided then to give organised civil society an institutional forum for consultation so that its views could be incorporated into future political and legislative decisions to bring about a community of European states.

We are thus a kind of democratic participation and we must take this responsibility very seriously, particularly in a phase of history where representative democracy is under harsh attack and suffering a crisis of credibility.

We must convince Europeans that, even in the midst of this huge crisis, the European Union is still a positive political, social and cultural project and that the European social model, the only one of its kind, must be pursued and safeguarded. This is the only model which can contain the human and social costs of the pandemic.

 Europe must once again become a place where it is possible to improve the social situation for all. To create good quality jobs, open up the labour market to young people, the unemployed and people without job security. Particularly to women: gender equality is one of the foundations of social sustainability and in this area we must do more.

We, too, must do our part and proactively endeavour to find consensual, innovative solutions for the people we represent and for the businesses that will drive sustainable growth.

 We are therefore called to take up a major challenge. However, unfortunately, dear colleagues, this is happening at time when the EESC is facing a crisis of credibility and image. As you are all well aware, the EESC is dependent on the Commission, the Parliament and the Council for its financial resources. The Committee's good reputation is therefore fundamental if it is to strengthen its position and increase the possibilities of success in the budget negotiations.

What we must do now is lay clear foundations in order to avoid making the same errors as in the past: we owe it to ourselves, above all, and to those who work at the Committee.

For my part, in my role as CAF chair, I will do everything possible to ensure that we have a healthy budget that enables members to carry out their political work and ensures sound management of expenditure and proper distribution of existing resources, in order to achieve maximum efficiency.

The new members' work will be difficult: COVID is restricting our travel, but at the same time the Commission's strategic objectives require us to perform our consultative role to the highest standard and to make a useful contribution to our joint work with the European institutions.

To this end, we must be united as never before: I am ready to work together with you all, and I count on each of you to work with me, in the sole, supreme interest of the EESC and what it represents.