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European Trade Union Committee for Education EI European Region

CONCLUSIONS FROM THE ETUCE ON EDUCATION AS A RESPONSE TO THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

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The ETUCE called a Special Meeting in Brussels to discuss the impacts of the economic crisis on the education sector in Europe. On 20 January 2012 participants concluded that:

1. The European teachers' organisations need to strengthen their co-operation in finding ways to end the impasse caused by the economic crisis since 2008. The crisis that was judged to be the worst since the 1930's has developed to an unimagined extent and the end is certainly not yet in sight. During the last months working people and their families all around Europe have been hoping for efficient solutions from their national governments and the European authorities. There have been discreet signals to people to believe that the crisis could be brought under control but in the meantime it becomes more and more obvious that political reactions came far too late and could not deliver satisfactory results. Every hopeful new initiative- be it at national or European level - seems to be insufficient and is soon followed by the next.
2. Too many unresolved questions about the situation in Greece, the re-scheduling of debts, the European Financial Stability Facility and bank recapitalisation have delayed further action of the European Heads of States and Government. The situation has not changed for the better. The economy is still very weak. Only recently the ratings of several countries have been downgraded and that caused new roller coaster rides on the financial markets. The interest rates on debt increase. The World Bank has just announced that it expects reduced economic growth for the year of 2012. It forecasts a recession in Europe and even warns of a possible global economic crash.
3. The ETUCE points out that the recession is not a disaster of the future but taking place right now. It is clear that several countries in Europe suffer from the initial consequences of recession. Europe does not have to wait for a social catastrophe anymore. Social problems are the cruel reality in many European citizens' daily life. It is a fact that more and more people in Europe descend further into poverty. During the last weeks we have been witnessing desperate citizens in many European capitals demonstrating against unbearable living conditions. Now, it is high time to change the course and to work with combined energies against the worsening of the crisis and for improvement. Our governments have to make sure now that the crisis does not spread even further.
4. In October 2011, the ETUCE issued its first statement on the economic crisis. That statement emphasised the danger of the one major consequence that the European crisis management has declared to be the main element in the solution process – the development and implementation of austerity policies. In this new statement the ETUCE repeats its severe doubts, not only about the social justice of

austerity measures. Austerity plans hit the weakest groups of Europe's societies. Workers, pensioners, youth, single parents and many other socially disadvantaged citizens will have to suffer from the debt crisis that has been caused by a group of irresponsible financial players who were looking for big profits. Therefore, national and international trade union organisations, some political parties and NGO's have strongly condemned the austerity measures as socially unfair.

5. The ETUCE also calls into question whether these brutal measures and budget policies will really bring Europe closer to the end of the economic crisis. Just saving in the wrong places can hardly be the right response in times when Europe needs massive economic growth and employment more than ever. Europe needs economic, social and structural reforms and urgent measures to promote growth. These reforms must also create a better social balance and fill the deep gaps between the rich and the poor. The ETUCE believes in a policy based on solidarity and fairness recognising the need for solutions to regulate the financial market avoiding a complete panic and destabilisation of the European economy. The ETUCE fears that otherwise austerity measures in the absence of hard-hitting economic and financial plans could turn Europe into a political trap, too. Right-wing populist parties could benefit from the despair of citizens who feel to let down by their politicians.
6. Education is not only facing the consequences of the crisis; it is facing the consequences of the lack of vision and courage of policymakers. We must assert yet again, that education is a core investment for the future of Europe and is a key part of the solution to the economic crisis. Slashing education and other public services at this time is not only unfair and unhelpful: it is actually deepening the crisis and causing long-term damage to our economic prospects and the fabric of our societies. The economic crisis is being used in a number of countries to impose deeply ideological and controversial neo-liberal policies as if they were objective responses to crisis. Education is recognized as an essential investment for the well-being of people, both present and future, especially in the context of an economic crisis, by all stakeholders and observers. The Council of Europe, the Council of the European Union as well as all the national governments' high level representatives, all have, at some point, admitted this basic truth. The gap between the wide recognition of the importance of education and the behaviour of many national governments since the beginning of the crisis illustrates the vulnerability of education in a political context dominated by short-term solutions.
7. The surveys and studies undertaken by Education International and the ETUCE found that the austerity and cutback policies, most of the time imposed without any consultation with the teachers' organisations, have a direct impact on the teachers' working conditions at all levels of the sector in European countries. Massive dismissals of teachers and/or full-time equivalent teaching positions not being replaced when retiring; closure of institutions; cuts in wages, pensions and/or non-wage benefits; unpaid supplementary hours; oversized classes; lack of appropriate infrastructure and equipment; impossible workload increases; all have been reported by ETUCE member organisations as a direct or likely impact of the austerity and cutback policies. Thus, it is not overreaction from the teachers' unions to state that the teaching profession is under attack.

8. Finally, the ETUCE warns of the dangerous irreversibility of a political split in the European Union. The last EU summit in December 2011 resulted in a new agreement on stricter budget rules which shall enhance integration of the 17 countries in the Euro-Zone and by that create a two speed Europe. These developments are thoroughly alarming and show once more the EU's disunity in their battle against the crisis. The ETUCE believes that unity at the height of this crisis is of the greatest importance. Every effort must be made to prove that these sceptics are wrong. The stakes are high. The EU must ensure stability and peace.

9. Facing this exceptional situation, the European teachers' trade unions have, more than ever and in close co-operation with the ETUCE and the entire international trade union movement, to coordinate their actions in order to deliver a strong and united response to these challenges, both enhancing the international solidarity of all teachers while respecting the national identity of their education systems. The ETUCE Bureau has therefore asked the secretariat to come up with a possible plan of establishing a frame for a European Action from ETUCE and our member organisations based on the situation in each country. The nature and the scope of the actions should be determined by Member Organisations and the plan should include coordination with ETUC activities.