

Speech by President Juncker at the inauguration ceremony of the European Labour Authority

Prime Minister, dear Peter,

Valdis,

Marianne,

Maroš,

Nicolas, the newcomer, gutt dat's de do bass,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Excellencies – because there are some,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Dear friends,

I am happy to see you tonight to inaugurate the European Labour Authority. As our British friends would say, this Authority is the 'jewel in the crown' of a lot of the work we have been doing together for a social Europe in recent years.

When I was elected President of the Commission five years ago, the European Union was in a dire situation. It was struggling to overcome its worst economic and social crisis since World War II. And it was seen by too many of our citizens as a source of problems, rather than solutions. This has changed to a large extent.

Five years later, now, I believe that Europe is in much better shape.

14 million jobs have been created. Unemployment is at an historical low, lower than in 2000. The results do not come out of nowhere. For five years, we have fought hard to put Europe back on track and sustain its economic recovery.

From the Investment Plan for Europe – which was initially called Juncker Plan, but now that it works, it is called the European Fund for Strategic Investments – to the use of flexibility under the Stability and Growth Pact, from the fight – big fight – to keep Greece in the euro, to the relaunch of the Youth Guarantee, we worked hard to deliver where it mattered for European citizens.

What we have done, we have done with a purpose: That of putting people first. Since I was a young Minister of Employment – a few years ago, at the age of

28, I am 64 now, envisaging 65 – I have been campaigning for a more social Europe and have been pushing for a humane approach to European politics.

I did not stop that when I became President of the Commission. And I am proud to see that this ambition is reflected in the European Pillar of Social Rights, which we managed to proclaim in November 2017 in Gothenburg, with the support of the European Parliament and the Council, in the presence of European leaders and of many of you here.

The Pillar is a major step forward. It contains rights and principles which are essential for the world of work in the 21st century: From fair wages to health care; from lifelong learning to a better work-life balance; from equality between women and men to the right to a minimum income.

Already today, thanks to the hard work of Valdis and Marianne, 24 legal initiatives were adopted under this mandate to give life to the Pillar. And I am very pleased to see that the Pillar will be at the core of the priorities of the future Commission, as well as in the safe hands of Valdis and in the experienced hands of my good friend Nicolas.

In all these years, one particular challenge has been to fight for modern, fair and efficient rules for the free movement of workers. I am experienced enough not to be naïve, but it happens from time to time. This freedom – the one of the movement of workers – has been under attack. Weak attacks, sometimes. Strong attacks, more times.

Freedom of movement was attacked for the wrong reasons, with many nationalistic and hateful arguments by people who wanted to discriminate between workers and create in fact two classes of European citizens. We cannot and that we will never accept that.

But freedom of movement was also under question for more legitimate reasons, because it was not seen as fair and because there were risks associated to a lack of rules, to fraud or to abuse. This we needed to fix urgently. If we had gone back on free movement of people, we would have lost one of our most cherished freedoms, and we would have put at risk the rest of our Single Market. We needed to act to reconcile workers with the European Union and to rebuild trust across Europe.

This is why, already in my Political Guidelines at the start of our mandate, I announced that we would change the rules on the posting of workers, to enforce a very simple principle: the same pay for the same work at the same place. This was not easy, but thanks to the efforts of everyone, common sense for once prevailed. And I am particularly proud that we were able to build a broad majority around these new rules. And I am grateful to Jeroen Lenaers, the Rapporteur of the Parliament, for having driven this process. Gut gemacht, Jeroen!

In the same spirit, we initiated a modernisation of the rules for the coordination of social security systems in order to facilitate cooperation between Member States, yet again with a simple principle in mind: equality of treatment between Europeans and between workers.

And I trust that the provisional agreement reached between Parliament and Council will soon be confirmed – this will be a good thing and Nicolas Schmit will do it.

Fair rules were needed, but they are not sufficient. Fair rules were needed, but they are not sufficient. Fair rules need to be enforced to be effective. This is why I proposed a European Labour Authority in September 2017. I pointed out at the time that it was absurd to have a banking authority to enforce European banking standards, but still no common labour authority to ensure fairness in the Single Market.

The new Authority was established in record time – it took less than a year – and I want to pay a special tribute to Marianne, to the different Council Presidencies and to the Parliament – I was mentioning Jeroen a minute ago.

I am also very happy, dear Peter, that Member States decided to locate the Authority in Bratislava. This is a very wise, symbolic and important choice. And I do believe that Members of the European Parliament – they are here – will do their best in order to make this possible.

The Authority will be a great asset on our quest for a more integrated and fairer European labour market. It will be here to support the work of the national labour authorities – and I salute all the members of the Management Board present tonight – to ensure the effective implementation of European rules based on trust and close cooperation. Everyone can understand the approach and everyone will benefit: Better information for citizens and businesses about their rights and about their obligations, and a better guarantee that those who play by the rules are not undercut by others; better cooperation and simplification of the work across national administrations; and the possibility of mediation and hands-on support in case of cross-border issues.

This is not a theoretical thing, this Labour Authority; it has to deliver on practical problems that workers, companies, mainly small and medium-sized companies, are facing.

This is a particularly great step forward for the 17 million Europeans who live or work in another EU Member State than that of their nationality, as well as – it is sometimes forgotten – for the thousands of businesses that operate on a daily basis across our internal market.

So I would like to conclude by thanking you all, mainly those who were very much reluctant when we were still at the start of this process, some of them are here. They have been reached by maturity and common sense, because they finally agreed. But I am grateful for all those who were supporting this endeavour and I would like to wish you all the best for the work ahead.

To borrow the famous sentence of Jean Monnet: ‘Nothing is possible without men, but nothing lasts without institutions.’ This is true. I have to say that now, the men and women of my generation, of your generation for some of you, have created this institution and we very much count on you – mainly those men and those women of the future – to make it a success.

Bon vol à l'Autorité européenne du travail !