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TUAC Statement to the OECD Ministerial Council Meeting (MCM) 2024

For a sustainable and fair economy

TUAC calls on OECD Members at the 2024 Ministerial Council Meeting to implement policies that stimulate economic growth, a just transition, and address upcoming medium-term challenges. Hawkish monetary and fiscal policies, which could very well trigger another economic recession, need to be reversed, while social dialogue must be strengthened to devise strong and effective policies concerning the green and digital transitions, trade and investment, and the revitalisation of democratic institutions and processes.

Furthermore, as the OECD embarks on an ambitious enlargement agenda, TUAC reminds its Members of the value and necessity of involving trade unions and social partners in, and from the outset of, each accession process.

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1 Introduction

1. With the world economy underperforming, economies are facing multiple long-term challenges.

2. Global growth is expected to remain stuck at an average of 3% over 2023-2025 (OECD, 2024[1]), considerably lower than the 2000-2019 average of 3.8% (IMF, 2024[2]). Low expected growth reflects monetary policy tightening on a scale and speed rarely seen, with lagged effects from already-imposed interest rate hikes representing a further risk for the economy (OECD, 2024[1]). The latter, when combined with a return to restrictive fiscal policy (IMF, 2024[2]), does not bode well for the economy, nor for working people.

3. Addressing challenges such as climate change, digital transformation and ageing requires consistent policy action over many years. Misguided policy choices will drag the economy down in the short term and leave scarring effects in the long. Triggering an unnecessary crisis by overtightening monetary policy will turn cyclical into structural unemployment (Stockhammer and Jump, 2022[3]). Keeping interest rates too high strongly disadvantages economic activities that require major upfront capital investment or that depend heavily on future cash flows. Many of the sectors that are urgently needed to expand (renewable energies, energy efficiency, intensive research and innovative start-ups) are held back by the high cost of finance (Millard, 2024[4]) (Jordà, Singh and Taylor, 2023[5]) (Fornaro and Wolf, 2023[6]). Calls to develop private sector involvement in the greening of the economy are undermined by high interest rates. At the same time, a return to fiscal austerity, especially cuts in public services and social benefits, will widen already high inequalities, further erode confidence in society and undermine democracy by increasing political polarisation (Gabriel, Klein and Pessoa, 2022[7]).

4. TUAC urges governments to recognise that the long term starts now. Mega challenges cannot be disconnected from current economic policy choices. TUAC calls for:

- Central banks to fully respect their dual mandate of achieving price stability and high employment, and for governments to adjust the mandate of monetary policy institutions to reflect the urgency of climate sustainability goals. Policy interest rates to be cut deep and fast to avoid an unnecessary recession and reduction in capital investment required for the green transition.
- New and balanced fiscal policy frameworks that combine the strategy of sustainable public finances with the objective of the ecological-social transformation of the economy and the need to keep the economy operating close to full potential.
- Fiscal policy strategies that shield that public spending which enhances social cohesion and supports workers facing labour market transition. OECD members should work to achieve more equitable tax systems, encompassing capital and financial transaction taxation, targeting rising profits to tackle growing inequalities and increase public revenues. Workers should not be alone bearing the burden of fiscal consolidation.

- Close coordination of monetary and fiscal policy, involving social partners, to arrive at an equitable and balanced macroeconomic policy mix.

2 Just transition

5. If not managed carefully, the shift to low carbon economies will exacerbate inequalities and fuel social unrest (OECD, 2021[8]) (Markkanen and Anger-Kraavi, 2019[9]). Countries may face public opposition towards slowing down climate action if they fail to embrace a broader agenda of social progress and well-being for all citizens (Martin, 2021[10]). To succeed, the transition must be a “just transition”, ensuring that costs and benefits are equitably shared across all groups and territories (Rodríguez-Pose and Bartalucci, 2023[11]). Putting equity at the heart of the climate action requires not only strong redistributive policies, such as progressive taxation and carbon pricing, but also strategic pre-distributive measures, for instance by embedding conditionalities in industrial policies to support the creation of quality green jobs (Mazzucato and Rodrik, 2023[12]).

6. While numerous assessments claim that the green transition will result in net job creation, these jobs will not entirely be in the same sectors and regions as those facing job losses (such as coal-mining territories), nor will they require the same skills. Without just transition policies, the green transition risks leading to significant direct and indirect income losses for workers and could leave many of them and their communities behind. Trade unions are also concerned about the quality of new jobs created, including in terms of wages, working conditions and employment protection; in the renewable energy sector for instance, short-term contracts prevail despite governments’ long-term commitment to invest in the deployment of clean energy (IRENA and ILO, 2023[13]). Globally,1.2 billion jobs are in farming, fisheries, forestry, and tourism. According to the ILO, “workers – especially those working outdoors – will be exposed to the impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution for longer durations and at greater intensities. Heat stress alone is predicted to bring about productivity loss equivalent to 80 million jobs by 2030” (International Labour Conference, 2023[14]). Accelerating just transition policies with urgent targeted measures and adequate resources is necessary to protect employment levels, as well as human and labour rights, equity, peace, and social justice.

7. To deliver a truly *just* transition in line with the Paris Agreement and the ILO Tripartite Guidelines on a Just Transition adopted in 2015, and reaffirmed by all social parties in June 2023, countries must protect the rights and livelihood of workers including by investing in social protection and by actively promoting social dialogue at company, sectoral, national, and sub-national levels. Collective bargaining is essential to advance the green transition by adapting working processes, anticipating the expected adjustments from climate policy, helping design appropriate policy responses and by fostering innovation and skills development (OECD, 2019[15]).

8. Collective agreements have been concluded to protect workers’ health and safety in more hazardous working environments in some OECD countries, but the coverage is still limited, and governments should further support the promotion of social dialogue. Beyond adaptation to climate change, collective bargaining is also key to design and implement adequate mitigation policies at company or sectoral level. In Spain, an agreement was signed by the government, trade unions and the Federation of Coal Mining Businesses to phase out coal production (ITJ,

2022[16]). In France, a national interprofessional agreement was reached to encourage all companies to accelerate their green transition through social dialogue (ANI, 2023[17]).

9. Platforms gathering governments, businesses and trade unions should also be set up to plan, design, and review domestic policies. The Just Transition Commission in Scotland, established by the Scottish Parliament in April 2022, along with the Canada Sustainable Jobs Act introduced in June 2023, which aims to establish the Sustainable Jobs Partnership Council with the participation of trade unions, both offer good examples on which OECD members should build.

3 Humans in control of artificial intelligence

10. The rapid advent of generative artificial intelligence over the past year has prompted lively debate, sparking enthusiastic claims about its potential to improve productivity and spur economic growth, as well as concern about the replaceability of human labour. While the net effect is at this stage difficult to foresee, what is clear is the urgent need for action to shape its trajectory and ensure it is one that leads to shared prosperity, rather than exacerbating distributional divides. Recent analysis by the International Monetary Fund highlights the potential for AI to exacerbate income and wealth inequality between countries (Cazzaniga et al., 2024[18]), calling on governments to “proactively address [this risk] to prevent the technology from further stoking social tensions” (Georgieva, 2024[19]).

11. Generative AI adds another layer of complexity to the ways in which AI has been impacting the world of work over the past few years. Artificial intelligence has the potential to improve job quality in many ways, including higher wages stemming from improved productivity, as well as the reduction of monotonous and, in some instances, dangerous tasks. At the same time, the use of AI tools in people management – or “algorithmic management” – poses multiple risks to workers. Research shows that the use of AI tools in people management frequently results in increased pace and intensity of work; in the OECD AI surveys, 85% of respondents working in finance and 76% of respondents working in manufacturing reported that AI had increased the pace at which they performed their tasks (Lane, Williams and Broecke, 2023[20]). This can lead to heightened stress, mental health concerns and risks to workers’ physical safety (OECD, 2023[21]).

12. Movement and productivity tracking tools powered by AI have significantly expanded employers’ monitoring and surveillance powers, enabling a massive amount of data and information to be collected from workers. The use of such tools – which has expanded since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic – raises serious issues of workers’ rights to privacy (OECD, 2023[21]). There are also documented instances of employers using AI tools to predict and interfere with workers’ efforts to join or form a trade union, in breach of their right to freedom of association (OECD, 2021[22]).

13. Algorithmic decision-making carries the risk of exacerbating and further systematising bias and discrimination (OECD, 2023[21]). Bias can be built into AI systems in the development phase and occur at the various points of use of AI systems in the workplace, such as hiring, performance evaluation and access to the workplace or workplace tools. The lack of transparency in algorithmic decision-making makes discrimination difficult to detect, and, coupled with the current grey areas regarding accountability, poses significant challenges for workers to invoke the legal protections offered by existing non-discrimination laws (OECD, 2023[21]).

14. These and other risks underscore the need for binding legislation to address the different ways in which AI can affect rights at work. Soft law instruments – such as the growing number of principles and standards published by technology companies – are insufficient to prevent

potential harms to workers and guarantee a "human-centred approach" to AI, as the many cases of technology-driven human rights infringements show (JDSUPRA, 2021[23]) (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2022[24]) (Compa, 2022[25]) (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2023[26]). As AI continues to develop and be integrated into workplaces at speed, it is crucial that governments do not let the push to promote innovation outweigh concerns regarding human rights and democracy.

15. There are additional concerns related to the interplay between AI and environmental sustainability and market competition. The computing needs of AI data centres require extensive energy and water consumption; hence their localisation can pose environmental risks for local environments, which should be addressed, including through ESG reporting. As for market competition, the exorbitant investment costs, and data requirements for building up AI technology lead to further consolidation and market concentration in a sector – the digital one – where a handful of operators have quasi-monopolistic power. This additional concentration of market power with a few companies could hamper the just adoption of the technology and hurt workers in the process.

16. Giving workers a seat at the table through strengthened social dialogue and collective bargaining is crucial to harness the benefits of AI and ensure these are equally shared (OECD, 2023[21]). Social dialogue and collective bargaining also play a key role in managing the risks to workers and ensuring that AI is implemented in a way that improves job quality and is respectful of human rights (OECD, 2023[21]). Research shows that facilitating and promoting worker input on technology development and deployment yields positive impacts for both workers and companies (Jan et al., 2022[27]). More specifically, it has been found that workplaces using AI and having a form of worker representation are less likely to expose workers to unsafe working conditions (OECD, 2023[21]). This is reflected in the OECD AI Principles, which explicitly call for social dialogue among the steps governments should be taking to ensure a fair transition for workers as AI is deployed.

17. Social dialogue and collective bargaining have a critical role to play by ensuring a fair distribution of AI's productivity gains, and that workers who are vulnerable to displacement are supported and equipped to move into new, quality jobs. This needs to be recognised as the heart of the "human-centred approach" to technology being called for by the OECD and its member countries, and essential to seize the opportunities of the AI "revolution."

4 Inclusive trade policy for resilient economies

18. International trade has come under considerable scrutiny in recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic, supply chain failures to provide basic medical goods during that time and meet broader demand surges in its aftermath, later energy shocks and accrued geopolitical risks, have made governments worry about their countries' exposure to free trade.

19. This comes after a prolonged period of stagnating growth and rising inequalities that negatively affected public view of the benefits of globalisation. In 2017 the OECD linked public discontent to the global financial crisis and "some of the policies associated with globalisation" (OECD, 2017[28]). That year's OECD Ministerial statement recognised that "globalisation has not benefited everyone. In a significant number of OECD countries the income, wealth, employment opportunities and social mobility of many people have stagnated, and some have even been made worse off, whilst the situation for those at the top of the income distribution have continued to improve" (OECD Ministerial Council Meeting, 2017[29]).

20. Economic research has confirmed that trade liberalisation can maximise aggregate welfare, but it impacts different sectors, industries, geographical regions, and groups of workers differently, with winners and losers of free trade policies (ILO, 2023[30]).

21. Direct competition with workers in non-OECD economies, characterised by lower levels of job quality, wages and social protection systems, adds pressure on workers at home and can trigger a race to the bottom in remuneration and standards (OECD, 2017[31]). While trade liberalisation is not the only reason for increased labour income inequality and decline in manufacturing jobs across OECD countries, it has often been used by employers as a tool to augment their bargaining position and circumvent collective bargaining obligations with the threat of de-localisation.

22. In response to these concerns, trade agreements with labour provisions have risen over the past twenty years, from only 13 in 2000 to 115 in 2023[1]. Yet, the tangible impact of these labour provisions has been moderate, at best (Myant, 2022[32]). The UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals should be at the core of OECD countries' action to renew trade policies and approaches. Governments should ensure that social, labour, environmental and fiscal clauses are enforceable with monitoring and sanction mechanisms to secure a level playing field, quality jobs, social dialogue, and collective bargaining in importing and exporting countries, and support just transition globally.

23. Such agreements should be reached only pending the effective respect of the abovementioned clauses, before opening trade and investment to specific sectors/markets. In 2020, the revised North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), labelled US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), introduced a rapid-response mechanism to investigate allegations and find

[1] Source: *ILO Labour Provisions in Trade Agreements Hub*. Last accessed: 13 February 2024.

remedies to uphold workers' rights of freedom of association and collective bargaining. This mechanism has been successfully applied in more than one case and shows that labour clauses can be effective if there is political will to use them (US Department of Labor, 2024[33]).

24. More recently, the United States launched the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), as part of a "broader strategy to make trade a race to the top", including the promotion of labour rights in supply chains (Cimino-Isaacs and Villarreal, 2023[34]). While it remains to be determined whether IPEF labour provisions will be binding, more multilateral efforts to raise the bar in terms of labour standards should be encouraged and promoted, including by the OECD.

25. TUAC recalls that the revised 2023 OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct clearly state that the responsibility of MNEs to guarantee the right to collective bargaining and better working conditions is applicable not only to their employees, but to workers and companies in their supply chains, at home and abroad.

26. But this is not enough. TUAC urges governments to take decisive action to steer the private sector towards corporate sustainability. International government coordination is required to raise workers' rights and labour standards and ensure that the benefits of trade are shared fairly with workers in all countries. Governments should lead by example and instruct all State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs) to apply the highest, ethical standards. The revision of the OECD Guidelines on Corporate Governance of SOEs should make it clear that governments are free to decide how they organise their economic activities.

27. Trade and investment should not be at the expense of workers. Governments must strengthen labour institutions and domestic legislative frameworks, weakened by decades of deregulation and globalisation, while respecting social dialogue and the remit of national collective bargaining institutions, to tackle today's record share of non-standard contracts and in-work poverty in OECD countries, and to raise working and living standards for workers in the Global South. Companies that offshore employment, directly or indirectly, must guarantee human rights and adequate working conditions throughout their supply chains.

28. By ensuring that social and labour rights across the supply chain are respected, governments can minimise the negative impact on workers at home and abroad, reduce ever rising inequalities, and address mounting concerns about globalisation.

5 OECD enlargement, workers' rights and reinforcing democracy

29. Reaching out to non-members and enhancing cooperation with other multilateral organisations is vital to find common ground and common solutions to the challenges discussed in this paper. TUAC welcomes OECD enlargement and the ongoing accession process with Brazil, Bulgaria, Croatia, Peru, and Romania, as well as the most recent opening of accession discussions with Indonesia, but insists that candidate countries must demonstrate their commitment to shared values before they can join.

30. The 60th anniversary Vision Statement of the OECD (OECD, 2021[35]) reaffirms that OECD members are "a like-minded community committed to the preservation of individual liberty, the values of democracy, the rule of law, and the defence of human rights." Yet, in many countries, democracy is weakening and workers' fundamental rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining are under attack, including in the OECD and countries seeking OECD membership.

31. Accession to the OECD must be on condition of candidate countries demonstrating their respect of labour rights and their support for quality industrial relations systems based on inclusive collective bargaining, as stipulated by the OECD in the roadmaps. A survey by TUAC with trade unions in accession countries shows major obstacles to the freedom of workers to organise and to collectively bargain. These include excessive representativity requirements; labour law with a bias against higher-level bargaining; public sector workers excluded from the right to bargain collectively; lack of a robust institutional framework to support collective bargaining (mediation, arbitration) and social dialogue; limited access of workers to well-functioning legal recourse systems; and legal obstacles to the right to undertake collective action. Robust reforms strengthening the respect for fundamental labour rights and promoting inclusive collective bargaining should be required before joining the OECD.

32. There is compelling evidence that inequalities exacerbated by austerity policies have a direct impact on political polarisation and the tendency to turn to populist, simplistic and divisive political alternatives. Much more needs to be done to tackle the root causes of the lack of trust in public institutions, which is linked to socio-economic factors.

33. The role of trade unions in creating vibrant, democratic societies is not always recognised. Trade unions represent the interests of workers and function as platforms where workers discuss and decide on a range of workplace and national issues and are central to active citizenship. They are critical to the economic and social fabric of society, and are key to tackle inequalities, foster social inclusion and ensure more equitable labour market outcomes. They also play an essential role in sustaining the democratic and participative infrastructures of society more broadly. Unions have also been instrumental in supporting democratic transitions. Today, countries that are considered to be more democratic tend to be those with more robust industrial relations systems and with a strong culture of social dialogue.

34. It is urgent that OECD Members step up action to protect and promote workers' fundamental rights, as enshrined in the ILO Conventions and the UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The OECD and its members should build on the Reinforcing Democracy Initiative and the next edition of the Global Forum on Building Trust and Strengthening Democracy to take this agenda forward and act in accordance with shared values.

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