



*"The most serious of the evils that afflict the world these days are youth unemployment and the loneliness of the old. The old need care and companionship; the young need work and hope but have neither one nor the other, and the problem is they don't even look for them anymore. They have been crushed by the present." (Pope Francis, 1 October 2013)*

*"When a society is organised in a way that not everyone is given the chance to work, then society is not just." (Pope Francis, 1 May 2013)*

## **Youth Unemployment**

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### **A crisis that threatens our future**

Across Europe, against a backdrop of widespread concern about unemployment, young people in particular are paying a heavy price for an economic crisis they did not cause, with higher unemployment rates than the rest of the population. Whilst youth unemployment existed already before the financial and economic crisis the average unemployment rate in EU countries is now twice as high for young people as other age categories, with several member states having youth unemployment rates in excess of 50%. As a Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions, we wish to add our voices to recent appeals for an urgent re-thinking of the strategy to address this injustice.

While there has been welcome recognition at EU level of the need for investment in young people, with billions of euro now allocated to youth guarantee schemes, economic policies alone will not resolve this crisis. It needs to be acknowledged that a root cause of the crisis was the failure to understand that the significance of work extends far beyond paid employment, with crucial personal, social and cultural implications. For this reason, Catholic social teaching has repeatedly emphasised that decent work is a basic human right. In many European countries today, that right is denied to many, including millions of young people.

The demands of the market and the financial sector have been placed above the needs of society and particularly above the needs of the young people. They represent the future of our society but their life perspectives have been diminished and their human dignity violated.

They run the risk of becoming a lost generation. The emphasis has been on balancing our national budgets, while the need to invest in people has been ignored. This strategy ultimately damages the potential for sustainable economic growth in the long-term. The demoralising impact of unemployment discourages many young people from investing in training and enterprise. In addition, many young people pay very high fees for university education and vocational training, indebting themselves at a young age, yet jobs are not readily available. Others choose to migrate in search of better opportunities elsewhere. While greater freedom of movement across national borders today is to be welcomed, for communities that lose large numbers of young people because of a lack of opportunities, the consequences are devastating.

A key priority for Governments in responding to this crisis, as recognised by EU leaders, must be investment in employment opportunities for young people. In order for this investment to be effective, there needs to be meaningful engagement with employers to support those who provide genuine employment opportunities to young people. Employers should be encouraged and supported to have a balanced work force, which would enable them to employ young people in need of experience alongside others who have experience to share. Equally important is robust regulation to prevent the exploitation of young people by ensuring that they receive just remuneration for their work and that any training opportunities offered in connection with internships or work placements are offered to an appropriate standard.

It needs to be recognised that many young people have become disillusioned with the political leadership and processes, which they consider to have overlooked their needs and concerns and failed to protect them. The spread of such disillusionment endangers democracy and threatens the future stability of our societies. Across Europe these sentiments have been manifested in a variety of ways, including violent protests and increasing support for political extremists. Parallel to the strategy for youth unemployment, political leaders need to invest in democracy by putting in place consultation mechanisms which actively engage young people in the processes aimed at solving this crisis.

In the long-term, education must be central to a sustainable employment policy. Education is much more than preparation for employment. It also prepares young people to be citizens and a broad education is therefore crucial. Nevertheless, educational institutions need to engage in regular dialogue with business and employers to ensure that they are also providing courses that are relevant to the current employment market. The traditional model of a 'job for life' is no longer a realistic or achievable goal. Many young people would benefit from a more flexible approach, which encourages them to develop a wide range of skills and continue to build on these throughout the course of their working lives.

In this context, the values that we communicate to young people in relation to work and employment are also important. Core values of solidarity, the common good and service to others can be lost in our increasingly materialistic society. Combined with the manner in which we tolerate significant differences in levels of remuneration for different types of employment, often with little or no relation to the real value of the work, this creates a cultural context where a young person can consider his or herself a failure because they do not have an 'exciting' job, a high salary or celebrity status. This is not only damaging for the mental health and wellbeing of the individual, but can lead to a breakdown in social cohesion and bonds of solidarity within society.

Youth unemployment is the most obvious and worrying symptom of a much wider problem - the failure to consider the full significance of work in social and economic policy. While, therefore, youth unemployment should be a clear priority for Governments, the issue should not be considered in isolation, but as part of a wider process that considers barriers to employment affecting people across all sectors of society. It should also become a permanent feature on the agenda of the European Council and figure as a top priority in the

relevant international organisations. Short-term interventions to assist those most at risk are vital, but more important still are the long-term policy and cultural changes required to provide a more just and sustainable model of employment for our societies. The present crisis offers a real opportunity for lasting change, where the legitimate aspiration of young people to take part in leadership is recognised and encouraged.

**In expectation of the forthcoming European elections we call on European Governments and EU Institutions to:**

Prioritise employment in plans for economic recovery, with specific strategies for responding to youth unemployment, developed in consultation with young people;

- Ensure rapid progress in the recognition of diplomas within the European Union
- Examine existing mechanisms for consultation and engagement with young people, with a view to overcoming both the political alienation and political extremism that are on the rise among youth;
- Support those employers who provide appropriate opportunities for young people, while ensuring that regulation mechanisms are adequate to protect against the exploitation of young workers;
- Provide support for education and vocational training also financially;
- Establish consultation mechanisms to examine the contribution of our current education systems to sustainable employment, with the participation of all key stakeholders, including the business sector, trade unions, labour organisations and young people.