OECD 99th Steel Committee – 23–24 March 2026

Trade Union Statement (~5 minutes)

Chair, Distinguished delegates,

On behalf of TUAC and the global trade union movement, we thank the Secretariat for its thorough analysis of developments in international steel markets.

What we hear from the OECD and employers shows that most of us face the same constraints: we are caught in between growing excess capacity, particularly in China, high energy and raw material prices, low consumption, with the risk of further economic slowdown given the pending energy shock from the war in the Middle East, trade disruptions, and potential further monetary tightening.

For workers, these are not abstract trends: they result in restructuring, plant closures, offshoring, job insecurity, and growing pressure on wages, working conditions, and social dialogue.

Uncertainty about demand translates in corporate short-termism: the issue in our view is not so much that profits are shrinking, but that they mostly end up being distributed as dividend payouts while companies remain reluctant to commit to any long-term investment, not even in upkeeping existing capacity through maintenance, let alone transitioning to green steel production.

At the Global Forum on Excess Capacity last November, we heard that trade unions are “part of the problem”, because they lobby for maintaining jobs where they are not viable. We don’t think deindustrialisation is a concern relegated to workers only, albeit the livelihoods of millions of people depend precisely on that. While we are flattered for being considered so influential, we only wish we had enough agency to reverse the massive reduction in steel jobs that we witnessed in the recent years. Europe alone has lost one fourth of its steel workforce in the past fifteen years, from 400 to 300,000 workers. This is not slow bleeding, but an emergency.

At the same time, we face shortages of skilled workers, both because there is not enough investment in the current workforce and because young people don’t want to specialise for an industry that they see without future. The longer we wait, the harder it is to reverse this process.

In the absence of clear and fair international rules on steel, we need to couple immediate defensive measures such as trade quotas and tariffs, with policies that boost demand through public investment, infrastructure, and coherent, long-term industrial strategies that support quality jobs and regional development.

The transition to low-carbon steel makes a Just Transition even more essential. But decarbonisation will only succeed with real investment, long-term planning, and meaningful social dialogue. A green transition without workers risks deepening inequalities and undermining public support.

A missing point in today's discussion is the role of Responsible Business Conduct in increasing rules predictability, and therefore building favourable conditions for long-term investment, while also reducing risks along supply chains.

We believe that:

First, monitoring of the steel industry should include employment and labour rights impacts, not just market indicators.

Second, governments must strengthen implementation of the OECD Guidelines for MNEs, ensuring National Contact Points are visible, effective, and accessible to workers.

Third, due diligence must be done *with* workers and not *despite* them, with genuine union involvement, independent worker voice, and credible grievance mechanisms. This is essential to avoid weak audits and corporate whitewashing, as well as disruptions to production.

A sustainable steel industry requires not only competitive markets, but also responsible companies, strong labour standards, and fair competition – not a race to the bottom on workers' rights. Given that this year marks the 50th Anniversary of the OECD Investment Declaration and of the OECD Guidelines for MNEs, we invite members of the OECD Steel Committee to reflect more explicitly on Responsible Business Conduct, reinvestment commitments, and Just Transition principles.

Also, in the context of the next Programme of Work and Budget cycle, the OECD should consider the opportunity of an OECD Due Diligence Guidance for the Steel sector that could help clarify the rules of fair game and fair investment in the steel industry, improving trust and certainty for investment and for jobs.

We stand ready to work with governments, industry, and the OECD Secretariat to turn these principles into real outcomes for workers and communities.

Thank you.