

## *Open Letter to the European Council – Brussels, 26 March 2020*

Dear European Union Heads of State and Government,

As you hold your Council meeting today via teleconference, we recognize that the urgency of containing the coronavirus pandemic has necessarily pushed climate change and other issues off the agenda.

In hindsight, it is clear that the initial response to this crisis by member states and the EU leadership has been slow, uncoordinated and inefficient. Ursula von der Leyen herself has acknowledged that “all of us who are not experts initially underestimated the coronavirus... we understand that measures that seemed drastic two or three weeks ago, need to be taken now.”

The philosopher George Santayana has said “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Let us therefore remind you that in 2008 at the outset of the financial crisis, the European Trade Union Confederation addressed to you an open letter calling for « the end of casino capitalism: for a new green deal ». Instead, your first reaction was to bail out the casino, by offering trillions in guarantees and capital to the banks.

Just as you underestimated the impact of the financial crisis then and of the coronavirus now, in the intervening years you have consistently misjudged the devastating effects of climate change and stubbornly ignored the repeated warnings of experts. It is only thanks to the unprecedented mobilization of youth, the unwilling heirs to this man-made quagmire, and the weight of public opinion that you are finally contemplating a European Green Deal. Its proposed policy measures that would have seemed drastic twelve years ago, are now viewed by the experts as vague, underfunded, and barely adequate to meet the challenge posed by global warming. Nevertheless, if it is rapidly adopted and implemented it will at least be better than no Green Deal at all.

At your Council meeting of 13 December 2019, you formally endorsed the objective of making the EU climate-neutral by 2050. That is indeed an ambitious and laudable target, but it will require a roadmap with a series of binding milestones in order to reach it. If Europe is to lead the world by example, its commitments must be formalized well in advance of the COP 26 in November.

We concur with the Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe, whose director Wendel Trio states: “Procrastination is not an option if the EU takes the climate emergency seriously...EU governments should not hide behind the slow pace of the Commission, but start discussing the increase of the EU’s short-term emission reductions at the upcoming European Council in March.”

When confronting medical or financial emergencies, you have shown that monetary and material resources can ultimately be mobilised at the necessary scale and speed. Unquestionably, your priority today must be to address the coronavirus pandemic. But that must not serve as an excuse to further delay action on climate change.

Inevitably, our society will face more major crises in the future – health emergencies, economic recessions, conflicts, natural disasters – which may be caused or exacerbated by climate change. The interconnection of our communities and interdependency of our economies make us all more sensitive to the impacts of climate change. The problem is structural and cultural, and our linear economic model based on perpetual, resource-intensive growth is clearly inadequate for the world we live in.

We find it discouraging to hear EU leaders now calling for a European Marshall Plan to relaunch the economy once we emerge from the coronavirus lockdown. Are they missing the very purpose of the Green Deal, which in the Commission’s own words “aims to transform the EU into a fair and

prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy”? We should indeed seize this opportunity to invest massively in the energy and ecological transition, instead of subsidizing a reversion to a system that has proven to be unsustainable, detrimental to our health and destructive of the biosphere.

The European people are showing solidarity and resilience in these difficult times as they have in the past. May this be an opportunity for us to learn and avoid repeating the same frantic eleventh-hour approach when tackling the existential challenges ahead.

Ladies and gentlemen, you have a fiduciary duty as our leaders. Please do not fail us now.

Rise for Climate Belgium