

International Commemoration of the liberation of the Auschwitz and Birkenau Extermination Camps 80 years ago

Joint Symposium and Commemoration of the Teacher and Education Unions of Israel (ITU), Poland (ZNP), and Germany (GEW, VBE)
Kraków, January 27/28, 2025

Opening Speech by the ETUCE President John MacGabhann

Distinguished colleagues, friends, and honorable guests,

Welcome to this important conference, convened under the esteemed patronage of the Polish Ministry of National Education, the Polish Presidency (granted by the Prime Minister of the Council of Ministers) and Education International. I wish also to acknowledge the invaluable, ongoing support of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

I extend our heartfelt thanks to the union representatives from member organisations of Education International and the European Trade Union Committee for Education, as well as the many dedicated educators who have travelled to Kraków from some 20 countries in Europe and North America, in addition to Poland, Israel, and Germany, the three nations co-convening this event.

This conference honours the memory of the six million people who were killed during the Holocaust. The Auschwitz-Birkenau camps, liberated on 27 January 1945, stand as eternal reminders of humanity's capacity for both cruelty and resilience. Of the at least 1.3 million individuals imprisoned there, 1.1 million—including Jews, Poles, Romani people, Russians, and prisoners of other nationalities—were murdered under the Nazi regime.

Hosted by Poland's teacher union, ZNP, this education conference is the latest milestone in a long-standing partnership among education unions from Germany, Israel, and Poland. For the past 60 years, members of these unions have convened regularly to explore effective strategies to combat antisemitism, racism, and xenophobia while fostering peaceful co-existence.

Recent events and political developments across Europe and beyond demonstrate that the far right remains a potent and persistent threat. Hate crimes, antisemitic attacks, crimes against LGBTQI individuals, and acts of racism and discrimination continue to plague societies. The spread of misinformation and fake news, designed to sow hatred and division, challenges us to renew and redouble our resolve to confront these issues with courage, empathy, and unwavering determination.

In an era where attacks on basic democratic values and human rights have become alarmingly common, it is inspiring to witness the unwavering commitment of education union leaders and activists. Their vigilance and dedication to opposing the resurgence of fascist ideologies offer a beacon of hope in these troubling times.

The resolutions adopted at the most recent World Congress of Education International in Buenos Aires urge us to develop strategies and forge alliances to counteract the growth of the far right and its assaults on democracy and workers' rights. The resolutions are a clear acknowledgement that fascism threatens the present just as it stained the relatively recent past. We must not be complacent when the warning bell of history tolls so insistently. In the education sector, unions worldwide must champion an agenda that actively promotes freedom and democratic principles, and that emphatically rejects hatred, the denial of science and disinformation.

Our collective mission is to establish and uphold curricular principles and practices rooted in scientific accuracy, professional collaboration, and the development of inclusive, democratic and humanistic educational systems. Schools, universities – and educators – must serve as safe, nurturing bastions of truth, equality, equity and mutual respect.

What happened in Auschwitz-Birkenau and the many other death camps was not an unexpected eruption – it was deliberate, planned, engineered.

It was the product of a system – an incremental, escalating process of terror and mass murder on an unprecedented scale.

There is an extensive, historically validated record that sets out with chilling clarity and objectivity the toxic ideology and motivations of the architects of this terror.

Very importantly, there are irrefutable facts and significant artefacts that are amenable to analysis. Trends can be graphed with accuracy and causes and effects identified with authority.

We must keep in mind that what happened was not inevitable. It could have been prevented, averted.

The facts show that the Nazi regime of systematic terror and extermination required many willing operatives and a huge infrastructure. It had both. It is incumbent on us to know - and never to forget - how and why this was so. What made so many act with such cruelty, such inhumanity?

The history we teach to our students and, as importantly, to our own children and communities must be informed by a rooted sense of humanity, a deep and genuine respect for those who were murdered in the death camps and profound gratitude to those who, since their liberation, have over the decades borne witness.

To our teaching we must bring the rigorous application of intellectual honesty, adherence to the highest standards of research and a moral compass.

As educators and as teacher trade unionists we properly claim the right to academic freedom and professional autonomy. However, with that right comes a concomitant responsibility to exercise that freedom and autonomy in the service of humanity, of all humanity.

To our teaching we must also bring the requisite humility. We must bear in mind that in the years leading up to the Holocaust, traditionally trusted communities of practice and professions were infiltrated and suborned – medicine, engineering, architecture, the sciences, journalism, the media, religious communities. Workers' movements too. And academia - educators.

Where there should have been implacable opposition to the Nazis there was, too often, self-deception, denial, timorous collusion.

Much as regulatory frameworks, judicial structures and democratic processes – including trade union processes - have manifest fragilities, we need such frameworks and processes now, as never before.

We must not make the foolish assumption that we as educators or trade unionists have acquired immunity against the insidious influences that foment division and hatred. No profession, no nation, race or creed has immunity. Combatting these influences and forces requires of all of us constant vigilance, honest reflection, an understanding of history.

The history we teach should be respectful and inclusive, informed by diverse perspectives, not captured or constrained by ideology, narrow nationalistic demands, atavistic enmities. It should engage our students not solely as citizens of a particular country but as global citizens.

It should seek to foster our capacity for reason, critical inquiry, compassion and generosity. It is probably no exaggeration to say that the obliteration of any sense of ethical, informed, historical perspective is an outcome desired by autocrats, populists, oligarchs and their corporations. They wish to shape a future uninformed by historic fact and unhindered by ethical or societal considerations. It is a clear function of history and the teaching of history to prevent such degradation. Let's not allow X to mark the spot of any failure on our part in this regard.

It is imperative that we recognise that the formal curriculum is supplanted for many by the derangement of the febrile, online, social media sphere. Therefore our teaching of history must adapt to take cognisance of the realities of the digital age.

The technologies now in the hands of even very young children can be used by the purveyors of hatred and division to indoctrinate, to evil effect. Examples abound. The same technologies, however, can and must be harnessed by us to do good, to enhance education, to build intellectual and moral resilience in our students. Curriculum and pedagogy must have the suppleness and agility to use all available resources and media in a positive and humanistic way.

The shaping of appropriate curriculum is a hugely consequential undertaking which simply must involve teachers. I would exhort Governments to take note. Use the expertise and insights of our members. Excluding teachers and their unions from the process is both ill-judged and dangerous.

Excluding teachers increases the risk that curriculum will represent the Holocaust as a distant history, diminishing in importance as time passes. That would be to betray our young people, who, let us remind ourselves, are already exposed in the media they use to an often trivialized, pop version of World War II history.

Tomorrow, we will have the privilege of an exclusive guided visit to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum. This experience will deepen our understanding of the atrocities committed and reinforce the urgency of our work.

This conference is also a unique opportunity to exchange best practices and innovative approaches for teaching future generations about the Holocaust. Colleagues from several continents have undertaken long journeys to Kraków to share ideas, inspire one another, and strengthen our shared commitment to ensuring that the lessons of the past are not forgotten and the terror of the past not repeated.

As educators and trade unionists, we are entrusted with a profound responsibility to model and inculcate values of peace, diversity, and understanding in future generations, in our children, our students and our communities. Education remains our most powerful weapon against hatred and ignorance. By fostering historical awareness and critical, ethical thinking, we empower young people to reject prejudice and embrace the shared dignity of humanity. This work must transcend commemorative days, becoming a continuous endeavour in classrooms, communities, and across borders.

However, this critical mission cannot be accomplished in isolation. We call upon international organisations, national governments, and especially ministries of education to allocate the necessary resources, both human and financial, to support this essential work. Political, moral and practical backing is indispensable to addressing today's pedagogical and preventive challenges. We urge governments to provide their full political, moral and practical support to the teacher unions' endeavours.

Let me finish this address by paying tribute to the unwavering dedication of the teachers and education union leaders from Poland (ZNP), Israel (ITU), and Germany (GEW and VBE). Their ongoing commitment over several decades to commemorating the victims of the Holocaust, engaging in critical dialogue, and reaffirming a commitment to solidarity is an example to all of us, regardless of where in this increasingly inter-connected and inter-dependent world we live.

Let us work together and exchange insights and best practice, so that, on Wednesday, we leave this conference inspired and united, determined to ensure that the horrors of the Holocaust are never forgotten, that the current pernicious encroachment of fascism and far-right populism is stopped in its tracks and that the values of peace, justice, and humanity prevail.