Introduction
The ETUC, national unions and European society: a multilevel history

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The current political climate in Europe makes this a crucial moment at which to be revisiting the history of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and its member organisations. Recent events and ongoing societal problems, such as migration and refugee flows, the European debt crisis and its aftermath, environmental issues and post-Brexit political concerns, all have far-reaching consequences for trade unions in Europe, at both national and transnational levels. Trade union leaders, meeting in London on 11 July 2016 to discuss the next steps for the EU and the UK after the Brexit referendum, namely agreed that the EU needs ‘to deliver on sustainable growth, quality jobs and hope for the future’ and to end austerity if it is to tackle the ‘anger and disillusionment of voters’, which the leaders noted ‘is not confined to the UK’. Since its creation in 1973, the ETUC has over the decades developed several guidelines which have marked a number of important milestones in its historic journey. With the necessary historical and critical distance, it is now possible to make an initial assessment of this history and embark upon a wider reflection on the nature of this international social actor and to what extent it has achieved its goal of representing social issues at the European level.

Following the publication of a historical record of the ETUC in 2013 to mark the occasion of its 40th anniversary, the ETUI recognised the particular importance of conducting a study that would offer an analysis of how relations between the European and national levels of trade unionism have developed over time. How have the relationships between the ETUC and its member organisations evolved

during this historic process? Have they progressed to the point of forming a common action framework? Further questions also present themselves. Have the relationships between the ETUC and its member organisations contributed or not to a Europeanisation of the latter, in terms of their internal structures? How have member organisations understood the events which have affected the process of European integration, as well as the various changes in the welfare state, in the role of private markets in our economies (with their enhanced integration at European level) and in a macroeconomic framework increasingly characterised by global international competition? In other words, has the European integration process substantially altered the historic dynamic of the national trade union organisations, or not?

These are the questions asked in this historical study into the relationship between the ETUC and its member trade unions. While the book takes a multidisciplinary approach, including contributions from both historians and social researchers, the historical perspective is of particular importance here. One question that is revisited in this publication is how the complex conjunction of interests and strategies arising from organisations with differing trade union cultures has been historically managed at the European level. In the 20th century, longstanding divisions in Europe affected trade unionism alongside other areas of society. In 1949, there was a delicate coexistence between the free trade unionism in the west and that of the people’s democracies on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, however, the differences between the trade union models have become less marked, resulting in a virtually universal acceptance of the values, aims and practices of democratic and reformist trade unionism. At the same time, due to the dynamics of globalisation, the European trade union movement has been able to extend and strengthen their international social relations (Hoffmann 2002).

Formed between 1973 and 1974, the European Trade Union Confederation, which held its latest and 13th Congress in Paris in 2015, has been closely linked from the beginning with the European integration project. Right from its inception, the ETUC has positioned itself as a trade union partner in the European political project. It does not merely represent a regional body within the international labour movement. It allows social democrat and Christian trade unions, and those with other democratic identities, to coexist under the same banner. To understand the approach pursued by the ETUC, it is essential to revisit the reasons for the development of trade union organisations, which were created to protect workers’ interests in the employment relationships that developed at the time of the industrial revolution. They later became national confederal organisations, but this led to the need for a new form of representation at the European level, and national trade unions decided, at various times and for various reasons, to group together in a European trade union movement (Beever 1960; Ciampani 1995). A wealth of initiatives and actions subsequently formed the initial phase in the internationalisation of the national trade unions, and this helped to support the process of structuring the national confederal dimension, to the point where the national trade unions started speaking with a single voice at European level.

There is no question that, at the same time, the demand for social representation at the European level was spurred on by the European integration process. As already emphasised, the process of shaping the ETUC and Europeanising the trade union movement significantly differed from the historical processes leading to the formation of national trade union organisations at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century (Martin and Ross 2001). While the formation of large national trade unions at that time was the result of social mobilisation, the ETUC’s development followed a very different course. Its top-down set-up emphasised ‘structure before action’, in order to effectively represent
the confederations, but the national trade unions were hesitant about transferring any real power to the ETUC (Turner 1996).

The 1970s saw an increase in the discussions and interactions between the national trade unions that were members of the ETUC, particularly concerning the amount of influence of each national organisation at European level. The impetus coming from the national level for the formation of European trade unionism resulted in increased participation in the economic and social decisions made at the EU level. This process of dialogue and participation often stumbled and even stalled completely, as at the end of the 1970s, but it was in fact the entire European integration process that was in crisis at this time. The beliefs that had shaped the creation of the ETUC were confirmed at the beginning of the 1980s: rather than being pushed forward by political Europe, social Europe was in fact enabling and giving political impetus to European unification. The changes associated with the new phase of globalisation and the Delors Commission’s initiatives pushed the ETUC to structure itself more as a transnational trade union organisation. The Single European Act and the Maastricht Social Protocol and its extensions in Amsterdam offered national trade unions access to an international arena of action in way that they had never enjoyed before, i.e. the possibility of negotiating European and therefore transnational agreements.

This extraordinary process of recognition, which also changed trade union culture, was accompanied by the development of Interregional Trade Union Councils, created for the first time in 1976, and by the formation of European Works Councils in accordance with the 1994 Directive adopted for this purpose. These developments unquestionably opened up new horizons and areas for trade union action. In order to pursue its traditional role of managing negotiations and achieve its goals of protecting and developing jobs, trade unionism (at the company, local, national and confederal levels) has been forced to confront the Europeanisation and globalisation of the labour market. We can therefore understand why, since the Milan Congress in 1985, the issue of a European trade union mandate to defend workers’ interests at this level has been repeatedly raised. These factors led to a resumption of discussions between the national trade unions, not only on making the ETUC’s action and organisation more efficient, but also on reinforcing its political role when tackling the new challenges posed by the socioeconomic changes produced by the ideological-political environment, European policies such as successive enlargements, the introduction of the euro, and the issue of how to protect Europe’s competitiveness against emerging economies.

Participation in the Community decision-making process and the possibility of signing European agreements between business and labour have potentially helped to give the ETUC a more robust structure, both internally and in its external role of representing workers’ interests. This development casts a new light on the need for a European trade unionism capable of tackling both the global society and a structural crisis which is hitting workers hard at every level. Within this framework, strong and constructive relations between the national trade unions and the ETUC are increasingly essential, particularly as the political crisis in European integration is, to a certain extent, weakening and delegitimising European action in the trade union arena.

In the historiography of European integration and studies into trade unionism in international relations, national historiography is generally the only method applied. The Anglo-Saxon countries have a stronger tradition in the study of trade unionism and industrial relations (Campbell and McIlroy 1986). Very early on universities and militant bodies in these countries set up networks to study this issue, creating the International Association of Labour History Institutions in 1970. A few attempts have been made to encourage joint
research work between universities and regional trade union organisations. One example was the ASEGE network set up through a European programme in 2002, which studied *Le mouvement syndical, comme Acteur Social Européen pour une Gouvernance Economique* (*The trade union movement as a European Social Partner in Economic Governance*). Today, there is a greater willingness than in the past, on the part of trade unions, to cooperate with the academic world in defining topics of interest and committing to a framework that allows the necessary critical distance from the action and immediate management of the trade union movement. However, a more transnational approach in both the subjects broached and sources used would be very valuable in terms of ensuring a better understanding of current or past developments.

A transnational approach such as this, which connects the national level with that of the ETUC, is still relatively uncommon in the scientific field and needs to be developed in the future. In terms of contemporary history at an academic level, the study of trade unions and their development is fairly rare, with the extent varying according to the country. Furthermore, a glance over the historiography reveals a predominance of historical and political studies, basically covering the period between the end of the Second World War and the 1980s. Thanks to the results of a series of scientific works conducted since the 2000s, however, we are better placed to assess the position of and role played by the trade union movement in European integration. Of particular interest in this respect are a number of seminal works on the slow and difficult construction of a social Europe, which both confirm its complexity and adopt a comparative approach (Hoffmann 2002; Pigenet *et al.* 2005; Dølvik 2005; Tilly 2005; Schirmann *et al.* 2006; Ciampani and Gabaglio 2010; Mittag and Tenfelde 2012; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013). It should be noted that from the 1990s onwards the analytical framework and tools for studying trade unionism fundamentally changed with the virtual disappearance of works by historians. This can be explained by the rules on accessing public archives, which generally made these works inaccessible during this period. On the other hand, experts in political science, sociology and industrial relations have offered us a very interesting conceptual, methodological and analytical framework for the historical interpretation of events, combining a general modelling approach with the historian’s appreciation of the unique nature of different events and developments. This has gradually allowed a new approach to be taken to analysing the emergence of a European social partner, whose absence was noticeable in 1973 not only in the societal panorama of old Europe, but also in global labour history.

**References**