1. National context: an insular tradition

The relationship between Britain and the rest of Europe has always been problematic. A widely held view is that island Britain is not really part of the European continent: ‘Europe’ is a foreign entity across the Channel. This separation links to distinctive political and economic traditions. Hall and Soskice (2001) contrast liberal market economies (LMEs) and coordinated market economies (CMEs), with the UK the European paradigm of a LME, while Albert (1993) identifies a confrontation between ‘Anglo-Saxon’ and ‘Rhineland’ capitalisms. These are oversimplifications – market liberalism is not unqualified, and the British labour movement, the longest established in Europe, can claim many achievements in securing workers’ rights – but they do have heuristic value. Britain, like other English-speaking countries, has a common law system and a bias within economic jurisprudence towards the primacy of individual contracts. Private companies are the exclusive property of their owners, and the duty of managers is with few qualifications to maximise the financial returns to shareholders. This distinguishes the UK from the civil law regimes in most of western Europe, where the interests of other stakeholders are a legitimate concern of managements and where freedom of contract has less iconic status. An additional factor of importance is that while the British electoral system

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1. Constitutionally there is a distinction between Great Britain (England, Scotland and Wales) and the United Kingdom, which also includes the six counties of Northern Ireland (and before 1921, the whole of Ireland). It is however common practice to use the two terms interchangeably. Often the label ‘England’ is applied to Britain (or the UK) as a whole, which is not appreciated by the Scots and Welsh.
with its ‘first-past-the-post’ method normally results in single-party majorities in parliament, in many European countries proportional representation typically leads to coalition government, creating an inbuilt bias against radical change to the institutional order of the kind seen in Britain in recent decades. This contrast underlies significant differences in approaches to industrial relations. ‘There is no such thing as society’, notoriously proclaimed Margaret Thatcher: an assertion which in much of Europe would be taken as evidence of insanity. The UK did not participate in the construction of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957, partly because of opposition to the founders’ ‘federalist’ ambitions; instead it took the lead in creating the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) in 1960, providing its first two secretaries-general. However, the government rapidly changed its mind and applied for membership in 1961 and again in 1967, on both occasions being blocked by the French veto. A third application (after de Gaulle’s resignation) was successful, accession taking place in January 1973.

Britain is widely regarded as the ‘awkward’ member of the European Union (EU), resistant to the desire of most other members for enhanced regulatory competence. This was one of de Gaulle’s stated reasons for opposing the UK attempts to become a member in the 1960s, a view which seemed strongly validated by the Thatcher government two decades later. Britain has been described as a ‘Euro-sceptic state’ (George 2000), with widespread doubts about the value of EU membership and resistance to any further transfer of powers to supranational level. In both main political parties there has been a wide spectrum of views on EU membership. The Liberal Democrats have predominantly, though not universally, been strongly pro-EU. Conversely a single-issue fringe party, the UK Independence Party, which campaigns for withdrawal from the EU, won almost 17% of the national vote in both the 2004 and 2009 elections to the European Parliament (EP).

Among the Conservatives, Edward Heath (leader between 1965 and 1975) was the most pro-European of any party leader, before or after. He led the abortive negotiations in 1961-3 and signed the eventual accession agreement. But Thatcher and her successors were far more suspicious, or simply hostile, to European integration. In particular, the Thatcher and Major governments (1979-97) usually headed the resistance to proposals for strengthened employment regulation at EU level, as well as refusing to participate in EMU. Thatcher’s ‘free market’ ideology was at odds with the prevailing ‘social market’ orientation of most continental member states, even those with conservative governments, and this encouraged a broader hostility to what were seen as the ‘federal’ ambitions of the Commission and other EU governments, as well as a strong assertion of the primacy of national sovereignty. In recent years, the ‘Euro-sceptic’ tendency within the Conservative Party was reinforced. Before the 2015 election, David Cameron promised a referendum on EU membership, in the vain hope that this might unify the party. In the event, the vote in June 2016 resulted in a narrow majority for ‘Brexit’, followed by Cameron’s own resignation. What this means in practice remains highly uncertain.

Labour has always possessed a strong anti-EU tendency, partly because many on the left have viewed ‘Europe’ as incorrigibly business-oriented, regarding national autarchy as a basis for more progressive social and economic policy. Though the Wilson government of 1964-70 initiated the successful accession negotiations, the party then rejected the terms agreed when it returned to opposition. In 1972, left-wing pressure committed Labour to the principle of renegotiation of the terms of accession, to be followed by a referendum

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2. The title ‘European Union’ was officially adopted in 1993.
on continued membership. The party also resolved not to send representatives to the EP (which was not yet directly elected).

The Wilson government, re-elected in 1974, did attempt to renegotiate the terms, (although not too vigorously) and the majority of the cabinet declared themselves satisfied with the modest changes approved. A referendum was held – the first time such a measure had been used in the UK – in June 1975, partly to resolve the intense internal party conflict on the issue; the result was a two-to-one vote to remain in the EU. Labour then ended its boycott of the EP.

Division on the issue continued, and the anti-EU tendency increased its strength after the 1979 election defeat. In 1980 the party conference voted for withdrawal, one of the reasons that led to the breakaway of a group of leading figures on the right (including Roy Jenkins, President of the Commission between 1977 and 1981, the only Briton to hold this position) to form the Social Democratic Party (SDP). The SDP achieved some short-term by-election successes but (given Britain’s majoritarian electoral system) had little longer-term impact and it merged with the Liberals in 1988. Almost certainly, however, the defections from Labour increased Thatcher’s dominance in British politics.

Labour fared disastrously in the 1983 election, in which withdrawal was a major manifesto commitment. Though until 1988 the official party policy remained in favour of withdrawal from the EU, the priority given to the issue declined sharply (Callaghan 2007: 224), allowing the party leadership to move towards a position of pragmatic accommodation. As early as 1983 the new party leader, Neil Kinnock, insisted that withdrawal could only be a ‘last resort’ (Haahr 1993: 103-4). Though Labour opposed the Single European Act, in practice its position shifted increasingly towards ‘constructive engagement’ (Daniels 1998; Haahr 1992). By the 1990s Labour was denouncing Conservative ‘negative posturing’ and insisting that the UK should be more positively involved in EU policy-making in order to ‘set the agenda’ (Hindmoor 2004: 150-1).

However, while the Blair government elected in 1997 reversed the ‘opt-out’ from the Maastricht social chapter, the UK continued to resist new employment legislation, and strove to dilute what it could not prevent. In line with the rightwards lurch of Labour party policy in the 1990s, Blair and Brown ‘operationalised “constructive engagement” [with the EU] as a project designed to drive forward Anglo-American free market and low regulation policies in Europe’ (Baker 2005: 26). In its approach to the single currency there was a partial continuity with the Thatcher era: though not opposing EMU in principle, the Labour government set stringent conditions for joining the euro (Howarth 2007: 50). Blair gave a commitment to hold a referendum before adopting the Constitutional Treaty, before the French and Dutch ‘no’ votes in 2005 made this superfluous. However, his successor Gordon Brown, who took over in 2007, insisted that this was unnecessary in the case of the Lisbon Reform Treaty – despite the considerable similarity between the two documents. Part of the rationale was the opt-out which the Labour government obtained (together with Poland) from the full application of the charter of fundamental rights – another indication of Labour leadership hostility to many of the principles underlying the European social model.

In the 2016 referendum, the party adopted a clear pro-EU line, though it ran a separate campaign from the government. Only a handful of MPs supported ‘Brexit’. For many, however, ‘Remain’ was supported as the lesser evil, given widespread disaffection with the neoliberal trend in EU policy. Many of the small groups on the far left used this trend as an argument for supporting ‘Leave’. The party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, newly elected on a left-wing platform, was widely viewed as lukewarm in his support for EU membership.
2. A distinctive trade union model

British trade unionism has a history dating back more than two centuries: the ‘first industrial nation’ gave birth to the first national trade union movement, and the character of industrial relations and trade unionism has long been distinctive. By comparison with most other countries, what is striking in the British case is historical continuity and the persistence of many long-established traditions that, in some respects, have been specific to individual unions.

In contrast to the revolutionary crises which occurred in many other European countries, in Britain the rising entrepreneurial class achieved economic autonomy and political rights peacefully and incrementally, and did not need to mobilise the working class as fellow contestants of the traditional order. Central to the transition from feudalism to capitalism was the negative principle of detachment of the (relatively weak and undeveloped) state from economic life: the doctrine of **laissez-faire**. This was carried over into industrial relations, running with the grain of the common law system within which the freedom of (individual) contract was paramount. This legal framework created a bias against collective regulation of employment conditions, making trade union organisation and action for many decades unlawful. The distinctive British route to the legalisation of trade unionism and collective bargaining was through negative ‘immunities’ rather than positive rights: creating a system known as ‘voluntarism’ or ‘collective **laissez-faire**’. As a corollary, collective agreements are not legally binding contracts, unions are not ‘agents’ of their members and there are no extension mechanisms to generalise agreements across whole sectors. Nor (until the recent application of minimal European provisions) has there been a legally prescribed system of workplace representation. Until the late twentieth century, the role of statute law in defining substantive conditions of employment (pay, working hours) was extremely limited and the legal basis of employment protection was likewise extremely weak; job security largely depended on scarce skills or collective strength. Britain also differs from most of continental Europe in that collective bargaining is detached from the welfare regime and labour market policy.

In one respect, British trade unionism is a unitary movement, with a single confederation, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) – formed in 1868 – representing almost all significant unions. But in other respects it is remarkably fragmented. From the 1890s (when official labour statistics were first compiled) to the 1940s there were over a thousand union organisations; and though numbers have been reduced substantially through a series of merger waves, there are still 170 (of which 54 are affiliated to the TUC). Most are very small but, conversely, there are 14 very large unions with over 100,000 members which account for 85% of the total. The earliest unions emerged as small societies of skilled workers. Later, ‘industrial’ unions (which, however, rarely covered every category of worker in their sector) were created in the major nineteenth-century industries and ‘general’ unions arose for lower-skilled workers excluded from the craft unions; then in the twentieth century there was a substantial growth of white-collar and public sector unionism. Mergers, and the efforts of old unions to expand into new areas of recruitment, have created an immensely complex map of trade unionism in which no ‘pure’ models exist. Moreover, despite the all-encompassing nature of the TUC, its affiliates have traditionally been jealous of their own autonomy, reluctant to accord it either functions or resources unless absolutely necessary. This has created major problems for its international role.

For over a century, most major unions (though not the TUC itself) have formally espoused socialist objectives and have been collectively affiliated to the Labour Party. Though
the party has never been social democratic in the continental sense, its policies have been comparable. Yet ‘voluntarism’ has been central to trade union identity, with ‘free collective bargaining’ a pivotal principle. This has meant, for example, that until the late twentieth century most unions were opposed to the idea of a statutory minimum wage. Effective collective organisation, ideally resting on a strong network of workplace representatives (shop stewards), was regarded as the best source of improved standards and of job protection. Cooperation with management was widely viewed with suspicion, though in practice pragmatic accommodation was the rule. In their years of greatest membership – the 1960s and 1970s – British unions could be described as both militant and moderate: militant in that strike action was often pursued in the early stages of negotiation rather than as a last resort, at least in major union strongholds in manufacturing; but modest in that struggles were often defensive or involved efforts to maintain a group’s position in the earnings hierarchy rather than attempts to change that hierarchy itself.

Over a long period, ‘voluntarism’ delivered results (Heery 2010: 550-1) – an important reason for the sustained belief that ‘Europe’ had little to offer British trade unions. However, the effectiveness of a system of industrial relations based on ‘free collective bargaining’ rested on important preconditions: a favourable employment structure, acquiescent employers and an ‘abstentionist’ state. The erosion of all these foundations thus posed major challenges. Rapid occupational and sectoral changes, the rise of more sophisticated and aggressive managements, and above all persistent government hostility, confronted British unions with an existential challenge. The Conservative governments between 1979 and 1997 introduced a radical programme of legislative changes designed to make effective trade union organisation and action extremely difficult. ‘New Labour’, in office until 2010, pursued ambivalent policies designed to encourage only ‘supply side trade unionism’ which served the interests of employer competitiveness (Ewing 2005; Smith 2009). Both governments also imposed extensive programmes of privatisation. Many managers utilised the new legal regime to exclude union representation, or at least to minimise the scope of collective bargaining. As in other countries, precarious jobs are increasing: though paradoxically the proportion of fixed-term contracts in the UK is low, since ‘permanent’ workers enjoy far less job security than elsewhere. Most recently, the savage austerity measures imposed by the 2010-2015 Conservative-Liberal government, and reinforced under the Conservative majority government elected in 2015, have threatened many areas of public services and public employment that are trade union strongholds.

Union density has almost halved since 1980 and, because of the virtual absence of sectoral bargaining and the lack of extension mechanisms, collective bargaining coverage has fallen even more sharply (Marginson and Sisson 2012). The number of shop stewards, on whom most unions have depended heavily for recruitment and representation, fell by over two-thirds between 1984 and 2004 (Charlwood and Forth 2009: 81). In the private sector, where union recognition still exists it tends to involve a form of ‘de facto enterprise unionism’ (Howell 2005: 132). Therefore, given the structural complexity of British trade unionism, formulating a coherent response has been extremely difficult.

3. **British unions and European integration**

British trade unions have shifted over time from predominant hostility to European integration towards substantial support, though with important continuing divisions, notably
over EMU and more recently over the Lisbon Treaty. It should be stressed, however, that debates over European issues have mainly involved a politically engaged minority; the bulk of union activity has focused on national or sub-national matters. Though the discourse of ‘social partnership’, once totally alien to the British tradition, now pervades much trade union rhetoric, Teague’s argument (1989: 29) that there has been little ‘Europeanisation of trade union behaviour’ remains true.

Opinion towards European integration among the unions (as within the Labour Party) can be roughly classified under three groupings. A minority, primarily on the right of the movement, has been strongly in favour of British membership. A second, left-wing grouping has opposed the EEC/EU as a capitalist conspiracy or as a bloc dominated by economic conservatives, which would prevent the adoption of socialist policies by a future Labour government. Between the two has been a group (including much of the TUC leadership – the secretariat and the General Council) which has adopted a more calculative or pragmatic approach and has tended to pursue compromise between the opposing wings. The balance between the different tendencies has often proved unstable. It should also be emphasised that though European issues have generated much heat in trade union debates, this has not necessarily connected with the more parochial concerns of most members, nor with the day-to-day priorities of national unions in the representation of membership interests in collective bargaining.

The TUC gave qualified support to the formation of EFTA. The 1957 General Council report stressed the need for a full employment commitment in the EFTA agreement, including an obligation on Member States to adopt appropriate macroeconomic policies (Beever 1960: 271). Writing soon after the creation of the EEC, Beever (1960: 267) remarked that ‘both Governments and trade unions in Britain are traditionally insular in their attitudes to the European continent and tend to believe that ties with the far-flung countries of the British Commonwealth are closer, and potentially more beneficial than any which would have to span the English Channel’. Concern with the Commonwealth link did not necessarily reflect imperial nostalgia but more importantly the fear that the Common Agricultural Policy and the imposition of tariffs on imports from the former colonies would raise food prices in the UK and – from a more internationalist perspective – would be a barrier to third world development.

In formal terms most British unions before accession were willing – or at least, did not refuse in principle – to approve EEC membership, but only if the conditions were acceptable. This position, often described as ‘wait and see’, was official TUC policy throughout the 1960s. This was consistent with the pragmatist stance: it was impossible to make an informed judgment until the terms were explicit.

As negotiations on the third and final application proceeded, attitudes among the ‘centrist’ TUC leaders hardened, with growing fears of adverse effects on export industries and the balance of payments (Fetzer 2007; Haahr 1993: 65–6). In 1971, Congress decided to oppose membership on the terms negotiated by the Conservative government. In the following year, two conflicting resolutions were both adopted: one calling for renegotiation of the accession terms, the other – despite the opposition of the General Council – rejecting EEC membership in principle (Teague 1989: 32). The 1973 Congress voted narrowly to boycott all EEC institutions (notably the Economic and Social Committee, then known as ECOSOC), against the wishes of the TUC secretariat: a policy driven by two major, left-oriented unions, the TGWU and AUEW (Mullen 2007: 103–7; Rosamond 1993: 422). Following this decision, the mining and steel unions, which had participated in the European
Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) consultative committee, agreed to withdraw. ‘The balance of trade union opinion... concluded that the EU was an undemocratic, bureaucratic extension of the interests of big business, designed to benefit multinational capital at the expense of citizens and workers’ (Whyman 2008: 26). An important policy issue on the left was the project of an ‘alternative economic strategy’, particularly associated with the industry minister Tony Benn, involving an expansionist macroeconomic policy, extensive nationalisation and directive planning, and controls over investment and financial flows. All of these, it was assumed, would be prohibited within the EEC (Haahr 1992; Whyman 2008).

The TUC rejected the outcome of the Wilson government’s attempt to renegotiate the terms of UK membership and called for a ‘No’ vote in the 1975 referendum. As noted above, the campaign failed decisively. Indeed the involvement of the TUC was relatively modest; and two expert analysts at the time (Butler and Kitzinger 2006: 114) wrote that ‘it was suggested that some secret concordat existed between Harold Wilson and Jack Jones [left-wing leader of the TGWU] to limit the area of battle’ in order to prevent a damaging confrontation between the Labour government and the unions. According to a conversation between a US diplomat and TUC general secretary Len Murray, the latter was anxious to moderate internal divisions and hence adopted ‘a “low-key” approach to the referendum’ (http://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=90634&dt=2476&dl=1345).

Immediately after the referendum, the TUC ended its boycott of EEC institutions, and nominated a top-level team to the ECOSOC. However, it still called for the reform of EEC structures to ensure greater democratic accountability, and for major changes in social, economic and agricultural policies. The argument of Dorfman (1977), contested by some other writers, is that TUC representatives in the 1970s nevertheless played a very active role within the Brussels machinery. However, the policies adopted by the annual Congress were less predictable. In 1981, and again in 1983, a majority voted for withdrawal from the EEC and this remained official policy for several years, although the TUC secretariat maintained a far more positive view.

The official position was redefined by the experience of the Thatcher government. As employment legislation in Britain, along with the monetarist bias of social and economic policy, became increasingly hostile to union aspirations, the implications of EC membership began to be perceived in an altered light. In addition, perhaps, the very fact of Thatcher’s virulent antagonism to ‘Europe’ made European integration increasingly attractive, while the possibility of a left-Keynesian economic strategy in one country seemed increasingly implausible in the 1980s (Strange 2007). Following the 1983 general election, in which Labour campaigned on a platform of leaving the EU but was heavily defeated, Murray called for a ‘new realism’ in TUC policies; one implication was that official Congress policy to leave ‘Europe’ must be abandoned, resulting in a ‘de facto pro-European policy’ (Teague 1988: 36). The TUC leadership had always been more nuanced than Congress itself in its position on European matters. Norman Willis, who succeeded Murray as general secretary in 1994 and had originally opposed British membership of the EEC, exhibited a ‘veritable intellectual revolution’ (Didry and Mias 2005: 152); he and his deputy, David Lea, displayed ‘a consistent support for the European cause’ (Taylor 2000: 255).

Using considerable ‘agenda management skills’ (Rosamond 1993: 424), the TUC leadership managed to outmanoeuvre the anti-EU tendency, and in 1988 the General Council agreed to invite Jacques Delors to address the annual conference. His speech (delivered in English) was both a challenge to Thatcher’s obstructionism (she made her notorious Bruges speech in the same month) and an appeal to British unions to support both the single
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Richard Hyman

market and the social dimension (MacShane 1991). As so often, official TUC policy shifted radically and rapidly, with minimal debate. A detailed policy paper on the internal market, *Maximising the Benefits, Minimising the Costs*, was adopted by Congress, clearly accepting that Delors’ promised combination of closer economic integration with a social dimension would prove beneficial for British workers. According to Rosamund (1998: 135), ‘One of the most remarkable aspects of trade union engagement with the “1992” programme was the apparent consensus on the issue across the trade union movement’. The European Community was indeed described by one observer (Stirling 1991) as ‘a new Holy Grail’.

As Mullen (2005, 2007) has demonstrated, debates on European issues at the TUC from 1988 onwards have stressed overwhelmingly the importance of the ‘European social model’ in providing a bulwark against the advance of Anglo-Saxon neoliberalism and as a source of new employment rights for British workers. As noted above, declining collective bargaining strength led most unions to abandon their traditional commitment to ‘voluntarism’ and to pursue statutory employment rights. Already in the 1980s, EU rules on the transfer of undertakings provided important protections for workers whose jobs were privatised; and many of the directives of the 1990s, though often merely codifying principles already established in most continental countries, had major implications in the UK. Two obvious examples are that there had never previously been a general statutory regulation of working time and that statutory mechanisms of information and consultation at company level were unknown. The TUC has pressed hard to counteract the opposition of both Conservative and Labour governments to effective European legislation on such questions, and more recently has argued strongly in favour of a directive covering temporary agency workers (though in June 2008 it signed an agreement with the CBI to support a directive giving agency workers equal rights after 12 months, rather than from day one as envisaged in Commission drafts). More generally it opposed the UK opt-out from the Maastricht social chapter, and supported the inclusion of an employment chapter in the Amsterdam Treaty.

The question of the single currency has been more divisive. In 1989, the General Council offered ‘conditional support for EMU’ (Mullen 2005: 182) and this was approved by Congress. Many affiliates, particularly in export industries, strongly supported membership; for example, a report by three pro-EMU unions in 2001 stressed the economic benefits but also insisted that ‘rump states that do not belong to the single currency club will pack little punch’ (Mulhearn 2004: 304). John Edmonds, leader of the GMB general union and regarded as pro-EC, commented at the 1992 Congress that ‘if it is a choice between the economic and monetary developments of Maastricht and the control of the Bundesbank, then Maastricht by 6-4 gets my vote’ – not a ringing endorsement. However, from 1996 the TUC leadership gave virtually unqualified support to EMU entry (Bieler 2006: 104), although Josselin (2001: 61) terms this ‘a yes without enthusiasm’. Key arguments were that remaining outside weakened the UK position in export markets, and also consigned Britain to a second-class role in EU policy-making. For John Monks, TUC general secretary from 1993, the failure of the Blair government to commit to EMU at the outset ‘is disappointing and there are real risks for Britain... It becomes increasingly obvious that only one decision can be taken: to join’ (2000: 185). Nevertheless, TUC backing was not altogether unconditional: EMU needed to be accompanied by a strong social dimension; the Maastricht convergence criteria could be damaging unless interpreted flexibly; and the European Central Bank (ECB) ought to be made more democratically accountable (Bieler 2006: 104-5). As Lea put it (1998: 133, 138), EMU required an ‘aligned process of completing the Social Union and of
fighting mass unemployment’; nevertheless he concluded that ‘on balance, the TUC believes that Britain should join, if possible in the first wave’.

These conditions could be seen as largely rhetorical, since the prospects of achieving them were negligible in the political conditions of the late 1990s and 2000s. Whyman (2002: 475) commented that ‘the trade union case for supporting EMU is fatally flawed, and its current leadership is basing its case for EMU on a number of questionable assumptions’. Accordingly, a significant minority of unions opposed EMU entry, primarily because of the restrictive nature of the Maastricht convergence criteria and the deflationary bias of the ECB, which were seen as a threat to employment. In addition, the largest affiliate (until 2007), UNISON, organising principally in the public services, has regarded EMU as an inevitable constraint on public expenditure and hence a threat to its members’ jobs and pay (Mulhearn 2004: 300-1). The rail union RMT has likewise strongly opposed euro entry (Bieler 2006: 153-4; Josselin 2001: 62). In 1999 a campaign group was established, ‘Trade Unionists against the Single Currency’ (TUASC) (Howarth 2007: 62). Other union leaders attempted to sustain an intermediate position: for example Bill Morris, general secretary of the TGWU (which was a member of TUASC), insisted (1998: 182, 187) that while many criticisms of EMU were justified, the risks of staying outside were greater, and that the key question was the timing of EMU entry. ‘The real criteria against which all claims need to be tested,’ he added, ‘is jobs. So the EMU debate needs to be sober and balanced.’ Similarly John Edmonds, general secretary of the pro-EMU general union GMB, wrote (2000: 193) that ‘going into the single currency will produce a series of unpredictable risks to add to an employment situation which is already unacceptably insecure. But staying out begins to look more and more like a policy of political cowardice with few real life economic advantages.’ It is worth noting, however, that rank-and-file opinion is far more negative: one 1999 survey found 61 percent of union members opposed to joining the euro, only 23 percent in favour (Mullen and Burkitt 2003: 333); another found a slightly lower negative opinion, but still substantial and higher than among the population as a whole (Mulhearn 2004: 296).

In more recent years, a leftward switch in the leadership of two of the largest unions – Amicus in 2002 and TGWU in 2003, now both amalgamated to form Unite – has resulted in a more critical position on EU matters. In 2005 Congress rejected the Constitutional Treaty (already seemingly dead as a result of the French and Dutch votes) because it was seen as entrenching economic liberalisation; while in September 2007 the Congress voted in favour of a referendum on the Lisbon Reform Treaty, largely as a protest against the UK opt-out from the charter of fundamental rights (although a motion to campaign for a ‘no’ vote in a referendum was defeated).

In assessing the internal politics of British union positions towards European integration, two influences seem primarily important. One is what Rosamond (1993) terms ‘sectoral pragmatism’: unions have tended to reflect the economic interests of their core constituencies. Hence those organising primarily in the public sector have shown particular sensitivity to the negative implications of monetary union for public expenditure, and the impact of competition policy on ‘services of general interest’. Conversely, unions organising in export-oriented sectors have been concerned that non-membership of the single currency has adversely affected competitiveness, particularly with the de facto devaluation of the euro against the pound sterling. But such material concerns have been refracted, and sometimes negated, by basic ideological positions, as Josselin (2001) has argued in her analysis of union policies in Britain, France and Germany, and Bieler (2006) has demonstrated in his more extensive comparative study (though he also provides much evidence to support
the ‘sectoral pragmatism’ perspective). In the UK, certainly, such positions can often shift almost overnight between left and right with a change of leadership in individual unions. Therefore, the argument by Strange (2002: 333) that there is now ‘a clear and deepening consensus in favour of the EU among British unions’ was somewhat premature. ‘Euroscapism’ has appeared to be regaining influence: even before the ECJ Viking and Laval judgments, the increasingly neoliberal stance of the Commission and the imposition of drastic austerity measures had begun to transform the terrain of European engagement. However, in the 2016 referendum the TUC, and most of its major affiliates, gave strong (though not necessarily active) support to ‘Remain’; although some of the main white-collar unions in the public sector took a neutral stance. Only a few smaller unions, notably the RMT rail union, supported ‘Brexit’.

4. British unions and the ETUC

Despite – or perhaps because of – the predominant scepticism or even hostility towards European integration, British unions played an important role in the consolidation of trade unionism at European level. The discussion below distinguishes three main phases. The first was the process which resulted in the creation of the ETUC and its opening to greater ideological diversity in the following year. The second covers the period up to the end of the 1980s when the TUC could be described as an ‘awkward giant’: the largest trade union confederation in western Europe, but often at odds with the next largest, the German DGB, and for much of the period attracting suspicion as being at best half-hearted towards the project of European integration. In the third phase it was accepted, and defined itself as a loyal member of the European trade union mainstream, a change reflected in the election of John Monks as ETUC general secretary in 2003.

4.1. Towards the ETUC

Dølvik and Visser (2001: 14) have argued that ‘until well into the 1970s, international trade union activity was foreign policy, a residual activity in national union offices, far removed from everyday practice, conducted by second-echelon union officials and staff with linguistic and diplomatic skills in far-away offices’. This was certainly true of the TUC, but the position shifted with the debate about EEC accession, which made European affairs a subject of widespread concern in Britain.

The TUC played a key role in the developments which led to the creation of the ETUC. It was hostile, or at least sceptical, to what it saw as the integrationist aspirations of the ICFTU European Regional Organisation (ERO), including the free movement of labour. As Charles Geddes, a senior member of the General Council commented, ‘my personal task as the TUC’s representative on the ERO economic committee was to ensure that the wording of the reports and recommendations was in such terms that they could be swallowed without too much mental indigestion’ (Beever 1960: 268). Suspicious of what they regarded as the growing influence of unions from the ‘Six’ within the ICFTU – from 1958 organised in the European Trade Union Secretariat (ETUS) – British union leaders largely initiated the creation in 1960 of a rival committee. They complained to the ICFTU that ERO ‘was too closely aligned to the EC, and that European trade unionism was being redefined to mean
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The new committee in turn became ICFTU-EFTA in 1968 (Buschak 2003: 3; Strange 2007: 239). In the following year the ETUS was reconstituted as the European Confederation of Free Trade Unions in the European Community (ECFTUC).

When the UK, together with Denmark, Ireland and Norway (which eventually rejected EEC membership in a referendum), made its accession application in 1968, and particularly when negotiations opened in 1970, it was evident that the architecture of European trade unionism would have to change. The TUC helped establish a European Trade Union Liaison Committee intended to lead to ‘a permanent European trade union body providing a channel for discussion and agreement on broad European questions’, and chaired its first meeting in Brussels in July 1970 (General Council Report 1970: 356). After a second meeting a few months later, the committee appears to have lapsed, but discussion continued through more informal channels. In November 1971 an ‘informal meeting of national centres’ took place in Oslo, involving affiliates of both EFTA-TUC and ECFTUC. It was ‘agreed that there was an urgent need for greater international trade union co-operation in Europe’, but there were conflicting views on the form this should take, and a Working Party was created to address these. The TUC position was that ‘any new European organisation should avoid constitutional links with the ICFTU, retaining freedom in regard to policies and membership’. The TUC was also anxious to ensure ‘the flexible and economical use of staff and facilities’. Unlike many other participants, it argued that ‘political considerations should not override practical considerations of trade union co-operation’, and questioned whether ‘the nominally federal character of the ECFTU was appropriate to an organisation that might consist of twenty or more national trade union bodies’. Voting rights and membership fees were among other problematic issues (General Council Report 1972: 188-9).

Though many of these issues were resolved in the following year, in August 1973 – only four months before the intended launch of the new organisation – the General Council still raised major concerns: ‘that the staffing proposed by the secretariats of the EFTA-TUC and the ECFTUC for the new organisation was too ambitious..., that the role and functions of the new organisation were insufficiently defined..., that its benefit to working people in Britain was insufficiently clear though the cost to the TUC would substantially exceed current payments to the EFTA-TUC, and that the danger remained that membership would be limited on grounds not relevant to trade union interests’ (General Council Report 1973: 199). Final decisions on a number of these issues had to await the founding congress of the ETUC in February 1973; others were resolved only later.

Many of the controversies set the TUC in opposition to the German DGB, by far the largest member of the ECFTUC. The first was the geographical scope of the new organisation. As is well known, the DGB argued for a body restricted to Member States of the enlarged EEC. Vetter, its president, wrote later (1983: 21-2) that the key purpose of the new body should be to influence EEC policies, and therefore restricting membership to EEC countries ‘was a very clear and logical position’. For the TUC, by contrast, the new body should address broader European issues, and in particular should provide a counterweight to the growing power of multinational companies; this required a larger

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3. This is presumably the same working group described by Debunne (1987: 38-43), comprising Heinz Oskar Vetter (DGB), Vic Feather (TUC), Bruno Storti (CISL), Thomas Nielsen (LO Denmark) and Georges Debunne (ABVV/FGTB). He also writes of informal meetings (that included Feather) taking place from 1970.
geographical scope. Implicit in this argument was also a concern that the new organisation should not be dominated by pro-integrationists. On this issue the TUC prevailed, to a great extent because no Nordic unions would join the new body unless all were admitted (Dølvik 1997: 137; Gorges 1996).

The political boundaries of membership were even more contentious, and linked to this question was the name of the new body and its relationship to the ICFTU. The TUC wished to establish an organisation open to all ‘representative’ unions and thus with no constitutional links to the international body; thus ‘the name should avoid suggesting that formal adherence to the ICFTU might be a condition of affiliation’ (General Council Report 1973: 201). According to Roberts and Liebhaberg (1976: 263), ‘the dominant faction on the general council... was in favour of a rapprochement with the communist-led unions not only in Western, but also in Eastern Europe, as a means of strengthening the socialist forces in the capitalist countries of Europe. If this goal was to be achieved, it was necessary to detach the European trade unions from the restrictions which were imposed by their links with the existing world trade union organisations.’ While this goal had some support, there was a wide spectrum of other positions. Some national centres wanted to confine membership to ICFTU affiliates. Others were willing to admit affiliates of the ex-Christian World Confederation of Labour (WCL) but not communists, and indeed the first steps towards such an outcome were taken in 1970 (Moreno 1991: 135–7). The DGB also supported this position, but resisted separation from the ICFTU. Again, the story is well known: the new ETUC was formally autonomous of the ICFTU, which abolished its ERO. The title ‘free’ was dropped; Jones, who was then chair of the TUC International Committee,4 recalled (1986: 267) his comment that the East German FDGB used the term in its own title. As a token gesture to the DGB, however, the word ‘free’ was included in the preamble to the constitution, which also recorded that the founding members belonged to the ICFTU. A year later, all main WCL affiliates in Europe were admitted, followed closely by the Italian CGIL; but other communist unions had to wait much longer, in the face of DGB resistance.

A third question, perhaps never fully resolved, concerned the authority and functions of the ETUC. According to Buschak (2003: 11-12), ‘in reality the ETUC was anything but a federation, rather a hybrid between a letter box and an information office. It had no independent competences, nor were they wanted.... The ETUC member organisations were satisfied with an information point in Brussels.’ This was hardly true of all affiliates, many of which advocated much stronger supranational capacities and the resources to match; but it accurately represents the position of the TUC, jealous to preserve its own autonomy.

This links closely to budgetary controversies. The TUC had some 10 million members, almost equal to the combined membership of the ECFTUC; but this was not matched by its financial resources. There were three reasons, which a comparison with the DGB may illustrate. First, most individual unions were poorly resourced. Whereas German membership subscriptions were typically a fixed proportion of members’ income, commonly 1%, British unions normally charged a lump sum. Over time, subscription rates had failed to keep pace with prices and incomes, partly because of inter-union competition, and by 1970 they represented only about 0.4% of average earnings. Second, the same patterns applied to confederal contributions: German unions paid 12% of subscription income to the DGB,
whereas British unions paid a flat-rate sum per member which amounted to less than 2% of subscription income. Hence the DGB, with some 7 million members, had almost ten times the income of the TUC. Third, disparities were compounded by exchange rate instability. Because the ETUC, like the ICFTU, was based in Brussels, subscriptions were paid in Belgian francs (BEF). Until devaluation of the British pound (£) at the end of 1967, the exchange rate was 1:140, which then fell to 1:120. By the time the ETUC was formed, this had declined further to 1:100. As discussed in the next section, depreciation continued, to a rate of 1:60 at the end of 1976, and after intermittent recovery the pound fell even further. Over the same period, the Deutschmark actually appreciated against the BEF.

Not surprisingly, the TUC sought a budgetary regime which would reflect these disparities. Its initial proposal was that contributions to the ETUC should be based on affiliates’ income, not membership (Vetter 1883: 33). Failing to achieve this objective, it was anxious to limit the resources of the new body. In the discussions in November 1972, a majority of unions had proposed an affiliation fee of BEF 700 per thousand members. ‘The General Council representative made it clear that they could not contemplate this figure, bearing in mind that the present cost of the EFTA-TUC and the ECFTUC taken together would be met by a fee of approximately BEF 450 per thousand members.’ Devaluation had added substantially to the sums required of the TUC for international purposes. Eventually it was agreed to recommend an initial fee of BEF 550, to be reviewed in the first year (General Council Report 1973: 202). Hence the financial issue was resolved, but only temporarily.

One may note one of the visible reflections of financial constraints. Anyone attending the four-yearly ETUC congresses will be struck by the contrast between the dozen or so delegates from the TUC and the massive delegations – two or three hundred – from its German and Italian counterparts. The British view is that the TUC should send the numbers required for the relevant purposes and that a larger contingent would be a waste of resources. In practical terms this is surely true, but the symbolism may not have enhanced British influence.

4.2. The ambivalent role of an awkward giant

In February 1973, the creation of the ETUC was hardly likely to have been a central concern for British trade unions. For two years, the TUC had been struggling to maintain a united front to resist the Industrial Relations Act introduced by the Heath government in 1971. Unions then had to respond to the statutory pay freeze which the government imposed in November 1972. Accession to the EEC in January 1973 was primarily an occasion to reiterate TUC opposition, since the Congress decision the previous autumn (as described above) rejected membership in principle and not only in detail.

The first issue which set the TUC at odds with all other members of the new ETUC was participation in EEC consultative bodies. According to Teague (1989: 32), in 1972 ‘Feather had assured the Social Affairs Commissioner that the TUC would take up its seats on the Economic and Social Committee as soon as possible’. But in the light of the anti-EEC resolution adopted in September 1972, the General Council refused to submit nominations. The result was that the voting strength of the trade union side on ECOSOC was less than that of the employers. Partly to encourage a change in the TUC position, Feather was elected as first president of the ETUC, despite the widespread expectation that the post would be offered to Nielsen of LO Denmark (Moreno and Gabaglio 2006: 77; Roberts and Liebhaberg 1976:
Before the 1973 Congress vote against participating in EEC institutions, Feather ‘had apparently given his continental colleagues the impression that he would be able to finesse a vote in favour of participation’ (http://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=74078&dt=2472&dl=1345); after the vote he had little room for manoeuvre, and reasserted the dominant TUC view firmly. As Vetter later commented laconically (1983: 24), ‘it is undoubtedly a British speciality to make forceful speeches of principled opposition to something precisely when one wants to turn in a different direction’. Feather retired as TUC General Secretary at the 1973 Congress, though he remained ETUC president until its second congress in May 1974; and before the referendum he agreed to chair a pro-EEC group, the Trade Union Alliance for Europe. He was succeeded as ETUC president by Vetter, DGB president from 1969 to 1982, a hard-line anti-communist and a strong supporter of the EEC who reportedly stood in order to prevent the election of the more left-wing Debunne (Der Spiegel, 3 June 1974). Initially, TUC support inclined to Debunne, but eventually it backed Vetter; this may well have been part of a deal with the DGB when Feather was elected president (interview, Tom Jenkins, 6 May 2013). Vetter’s politics must have set him at odds with the two leading British trade unionists of the 1970s, Jack Jones of the TGWU and Hugh Scanlon of the Engineers.

In April 1973, the ETUC formally asked the TUC to reconsider its boycott, but the General Council decided to refer the question to Congress in September, which supported the policy by a relatively narrow majority. As noted above, the TUC agreed to participate fully in the EEC institutions immediately after the referendum. Partly to demonstrate its commitment to European trade union cooperation, the TUC agreed to host the ETUC congress in London in April 1976. Here, there were frictions over the presidency: the TUC argued that the position should rotate, but Vetter insisted on standing for re-election (Roberts and Liebhaberg 1976: 266-7), arguing that this was necessary to ensure continuity when the secretariat was changing (General Council Report 1976: 230). There were also underlying differences on economic policy: the TUC entered the ETUC with ‘a whole shopping list of policy goals, the central focus being unemployment’. But while it advocated expansionary macroeconomic policies, the DGB gave higher priority to avoiding inflation (Dorfman 1977: 252-4). The TUC, while supporting the reduction of working time (indeed in 1976 it pressed the ETUC to adopt the goal of a standard 35-hour week), objected to specific measures such as strict limits on overtime (General Council Report 1979: 220). The TUC felt that the initial ETUC general secretary, Theo Rasschaert (previously secretary of the ECFTUC) was too subservient to the policy priorities of the Commission and insufficiently assertive on expansionary economic policy. Reportedly, he was regarded as ‘Vetter’s boy’ (http://aad.archives.gov/aad/createpdf?rid=224185&dt=2082&dl=1345) and the TUC played a key role in his replacement by Mathias Hinterscheid in 1976 (Dorfman 1979: 139).

Finances were a continuing source of tension. In March 1974 the ETUC proposed raising affiliation fees from BEF 550 to 650 per thousand members. The TUC responded that no adequate case had been made for such an increase, and a decision was deferred. Subsequently the General Council ‘considered information not previously available and took the view that a modest increase in fees could perhaps be justified’, while arguing against an increase in the number of senior staff and the number of working languages. A rate of BEF 600 was then approved, subject to further review (General Council Report 1974: 230). Again in December 1974, the TUC argued that the budget proposals for 1975 were insufficiently detailed, and it was eventually agreed to maintain fees at the existing rate. Exactly the same issue recurred the following year, when the secretariat proposed a 25% increase in fees.
With the continuing depreciation of sterling, the TUC in 1976 was spending over a third of its total membership income on overseas affiliation fees, and it insisted that the proposals were ‘not acceptable, and the aim should be for stability in the rate of affiliation fees, which might involve economies’. Similar problems of devaluation also affected unions in Italy, Ireland and Iceland, and a compromise was reached that these affiliates should continue to pay the existing rates, while the others would pay BEF 1000 per thousand members (General Council Report 1977: 164-5). Discussions continued, with the Scandinavian unions suggesting that payments be based on 1973 exchange rates; eventually it was agreed to maintain the two-tier system. The TUC finally agreed to pay a rate of BEF 750, while the higher rate was increased to BEF 1134.

In 1979 the proposal to link affiliation fees to the income of national confederations was again discussed. It was noted that LO Sweden paid less than a quarter of 1% of its income to the ETUC, the TUC over 5% and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions over 11%. The wealthier affiliates responded that they undertook functions which the poorer ones did not. Subsequently the secretariat suggested that contributions should reflect exchange rate changes since 1978, a proposal which the TUC endorsed but the DGB objected (General Council Report 1979: 213). Similar disagreements recurred the following year, reinforced by suggestions of a higher increase for affiliates paying the lower subscription rate; the compromise eventually agreed provided for a flat-rate increase in fees (General Council Report 1980: 179-80). In 1981, when the value of the pound had temporarily recovered somewhat, the TUC accepted another flat-rate increase. Within the General Council there were suggestions ‘that the influence of the TUC in the ETUC had been weakened because of its relatively low rate of payments and that it was necessary to accept the financial obligations which came with membership’; but there was also a call for a review to ‘ensure that the ETUC worked with maximum efficiency’, with a detailed assessment of ‘areas for possible savings and for improving services to affiliates’ (General Council Report 1981: 207). In 1982 the TUC approved a proposal that the following year’s fees should be set at existing exchange rates. In 1985 the ETUC secretariat again proposed moving to a single rate of fees; the TUC resisted, but accepted a larger than average increase since ‘it was desirable in the interests of maintaining their influence to bring TUC contributions into line gradually with those of other major ETUC affiliates’ (General Council Report 1986: 212). However, in December 1986 the TUC was isolated when it voted to oppose a supplementary levy to meet a shortfall in the ETUC budget.

As noted above, the TUC was a strong supporter of an ETUC that would be ‘as broadly representative of European trade union interests as possible’; thus it endorsed the admission of WCL affiliates and also favoured the acceptance of ex-communist unions. It pressed strongly for a speedy approval of the CGIL application, which was agreed (against strong resistance) in July 1974 (General Council Report 1974: 174, 178-9). Congress in 1974 also approved a motion calling for ‘cooperation with all European trade unions as a matter of priority’, which supporters made clear meant developing ‘fraternal relations’ between ICFTU and WFTU affiliates. When the CGT made an informal approach regarding affiliation at the end of 1974, the TUC was favourable but recognised that there was no prospect of acceptance, particularly since the CGT insisted that (unlike CGIL) it would remain a member of WFTU; but British unions continued to give ‘general support... on the principal ground that the ETUC should strive to achieve comprehensive membership and a fully representative character’ (General Council Report 1979: 214).

By 1980, CC.OO and CGTP had joined the list of applicants; the TUC repeated ‘that the ETUC should aim at accepting into membership all representative, independent
national centres in Western Europe which accepted its procedures and the broad lines of its policies’ (General Council Report 1980: 181). When it came to a formal vote on the CGT, the TUC was completely isolated, being alone in voting for immediate approval (Moreno 1991: 177). ‘We will persevere in our attempts to obtain that all-embracing body for which the TUC has pressed over a long period,’ the chair of the international committee reported to Congress. He repeated these remarks the following year, when the CC.OO application had been deferred: ‘we could be stronger because there are still some representative organisations not in the ETUC. We need them in the ETUC and they need us’. A delegate asked: ‘how can the European TUC be effective if it denies membership to important representative, established trade union centres, particularly when it is abundantly clear that the opposition is based on political prejudice and distortion that we would not tolerate from the employers?’ In December 1982, TUC representatives insisted that ‘they were more than ever convinced of the need to have the CC.OO in membership in order to strengthen the ETUC and to consolidate democratic forces in Spain’ (General Council Report 1983: 182-3). At the following Congress, a speaker declared it ‘a scandal that the largest and most representative centres in France, Spain and Portugal are excluded from the ETUC,’ accusing the DGB of blackmail. In 1984, a motion at Congress called for ‘close links with all major international trade union centres, regardless of affiliation, through regular formal meetings and exchanges; and strengthening links with those major national trade union centres seeking affiliation to the ETUC but currently denied the right to do so’. The General Council successfully asked for this to be remitted, primarily because it could be read as a call for formal contacts with WFTU, at a time when the repression of Polish Solidarność was sharpening divisions. But there was doubtless a sense that the prospects of quiet diplomacy had increased when Ernst Breit replaced Vetter as DGB president; and indeed, the ETUC congress in 1985 adopted a compromise resolution drafted by the TUC. The political balance within the TUC had also changed, as the Engineers swung to the right, and in 1986 it reaffirmed that it ‘would continue to work for enlargement of the ETUC’ but ‘would not take unilateral action which would hamper progress’ (General Council Report 1986: 212). A similar motion in 1987 to that of 1984 was accepted by the General Council ‘with reservations’.

Despite strong political commitments, British trade unionism has always been marked by pragmatism. As Jones declared at the opening congress of the ETUC, the new body should be judged by the impact of its work on the shop floor, and should engage in practical work without preconceived notions. The TUC ‘was shocked by the lack of co-ordination among the different national trade unions at the European level’, and pressed for more effective articulation between the confederal and sectoral structures (Teague 1989: 34). It opposed the initial policy that recognised Industrial Committees should be independent of their international parent organisations, and won support for a more flexible approach (General Council Report 1978: 226-8). It also pressed for more effective coordination of the views of national affiliates before meetings of the ETUC executive. Thus ‘the TUC brought a new and distinct style to the workings of European trade unionism’ (Teague 1989: 34-5). At the same time, its engagement with the ETUC enhanced its own status, offering a new organizational role and political profile (MacShane 1991: 286). Notably, Lea was the initial chair of the ETUC Economic Committee, providing an important policy link between the ETUC and its British affiliate (interview, Peter Coldrick, 26 March 2013). British unions also played an active role in the Industrial Committees, most notably the European Metalworkers’ Federation: Scanlon was elected its president in 1974, declaring that ‘his acceptance illustrated the deep internationalism of metalworkers in Great Britain, having nothing
in common with the strictly commercial objectives of the EEC’. He was succeeded in the position by Terry Duffy and Bill Jordan, who followed him as leaders of the Engineering Union, meaning an uninterrupted series of British presidents until 1995. More generally, most large UK unions have tended to pursue a ‘twin track’ approach, addressing the EC institutions while also building cross-national union links at sectoral level (Wendon 1994).

4.3. Part of the mainstream

The TUC Congress of 1988 is conventionally regarded as a turning point, with the invitation to Delors to address the delegates, his carefully crafted speech which insisted that ‘there is a vital influential role for the TUC in the European Community’, and the response by Ron Todd, leader of the TGWU and chair of the international committee, that ‘the only card game in town at the moment is in a town called Brussels, and it is a game of poker where we have got to learn the rules and learn them fast’. In fact, as suggested earlier, the transformation was rather less abrupt. If in theory the resolutions of 1981 and 1983 calling for withdrawal from the EEC were still official policy, in practice they had been a dead letter since Thatcher’s re-election in the latter year: the secretariat had been systematically cultivating its European involvement. Yet clearly 1988 had symbolic importance for trade unionists elsewhere in Europe. Also noteworthy was that the speech that followed Delors’ was by Breit, in his role as ETUC president – the first time that an ETUC official was invited to address Congress. This signalled an era ‘of active engagement – with the EC political institutions, with the ETUC, and with the TUC’s union counterparts across Europe’ (Mitchell 2012: 31).

Not that all previous tensions were overcome. The TUC continued to press for the admission into ETUC membership of ‘all representative national trade union centres wishing to join and ready to abide by ETUC rules’ and sought to win support in a series of bilateral meetings with other affiliates, including a visit to both UGT and CC.OO (General Council Report 1989: 164). This may have helped contribute to the other Spanish unions ending their resistance to the admission of CC.OO, which was approved in December 1990. In 1994 the TUC ‘strongly supported’ a renewed application by the CGTP, which was accepted a year later. With the admission of the CGT in 1999, a long-running source of conflict was finally closed.

At least publicly, financial contributions to the ETUC were no longer an issue – though even after the relative stabilisation of the value of sterling, international affiliation continued to represent over 10% of TUC income from its own affiliates. Thus when the ETUC sold its existing headquarters building in order to move into the new International Trade Union House, it was ‘decided that the financial position of the TUC would not permit the General Council to allocate new resources from the proceeds from the sale of their holdings in the existing building’ (General Council Report 1993: 108). The TUC approved the (financially demanding) organisational reforms proposed in the Stekelenburg report in 1990 and adopted at the 1991 congress, aimed at enhancing the authority and coordinating role of the ETUC. The General Council ‘also supported proposals to strengthen the role of the General Secretary, to introduce a formal committee structure to improve the preparation of policies, to strengthen the staff resources of the ETUC, and to ensure that at least one senior staff member was a woman’ (General Council Report 1991: 129). This still left important space for disagreement over the precise relationship between the Confederation and its affiliates; the TUC in particular (together with the Nordic unions), was sceptical of
the ‘supranationalist vision’ of some of its counterparts in other countries, notably the Italians (Martin and Ross 1999: 328).

More immediately, the choice of general secretary to follow Mathias Hinterscheid provoked serious friction. The TUC believed that there was broad consensus on the choice of Johan van Rens from the Dutch FNV; but the DGB decided to support Emilio Gabaglio and seems to have engaged in a degree of arm-twisting to win over support. ‘As the British and Dutch unions felt trapped, this caused tension within the ETUC, despite German attempts at damage repair by offering Norman Willis (TUC) the somewhat ceremonial post as ETUC president’ (Dølvik 1997: 162-3). According to Moreno (1999: 257), ‘the British unions’ preference for van Rens was only natural, not only because his position on Europe – more cautious than that of the Italians – was similar to theirs, but also and in particular because it fitted in better with their own organisational structure. They preferred a more “technical” secretariat that would be accountable to a strong presidency.’ This is not altogether plausible, not least because the TUC possesses a strong secretariat and a purely nominal presidency, rotating annually. Nor does it seem reasonable to describe the FNV as ‘cautious’ about strong ETUC leadership (Stekelenburg, like van Rens, was an FNV official). It seems more likely that having made an apparent deal over the new general secretary, the TUC was simply unwilling to change its position. In any event, Willis (who held the presidency for only two years until his retirement) developed a close working relationship with Gabaglio, who was invited to address Congress in 1991 and again in a number of subsequent years.

Another contentious issue was the conduct of peak-level negotiations within the framework of the October 1991 social partners’ agreement and the Maastricht social protocol. Lea, as assistant general secretary, played a pivotal role in the early stages of the European social dialogue from the mid-1980s (Didry and Mias 2005: 234-8) and was TUC representative on the bipartite Social Dialogue Ad Hoc Group which helped draft the agreement; he ‘saw the introduction of European negotiations as a way to circumvent the veto policies of the British government, forge a stronger role for the TUC and force the CBI into negotiating relations at home, thereby also countering the drive towards decentralisation of bargaining and de-recognition of unions at home’ (Dølvik 1997: 210). However, the TUC conception of peak-level bargaining was shaped by the absence of analogous procedures in Britain (indeed the virtual demise of even sectoral collective bargaining), by the fact that collective agreements had no legally binding status in the UK, and by the scepticism of some influential affiliates towards the whole idea of social dialogue. In consequence, its representatives in the ETUC debates in 1992 insisted that objectives should not be overambitious (Dølvik 1997: 246, 252). In particular, more effective articulation between national, sectoral and confederal structures was essential in order to develop coherent European objectives; only then would the goal of European collective bargaining be realistic (Dølvik 1997: 270-1).

The construction of a European bargaining regime involved complex divisions within the ETUC over the balance between national and supranational regulation, sectoral and cross-sectoral initiative, and collective agreement and legislation. The ETUC secretariat was pressing ambitious proposals, and Dølvik (1997: 282-4) describes how Lea threatened to walk out of discussions. A compromise was eventually reached in March 1993, but the TUC role had involved ‘a difficult balancing act’ between European concepts and British industrial relations traditions (Dølvik 1997: 299).

In the approach to ‘1992’, Congress in 1989 adopted a resolution calling on the TUC to explore ways of strengthening its services to affiliates on European issues, including the creation of a European Section, detailed information systems, education and training on
European issues and the appointment of a European Officer in Brussels. In response, in 1991 the TUC international department was renamed the European Union and International Relations Department, and a separate Committee on European Strategy was established. The TUC also created a network of ‘1992 Contact Points’ (later renamed Network Europe Contact Points) and launched a series of training and information programmes. A Congress resolution in 1992 agreed to ‘push European Community issues towards the top of TUC priorities and match that commitment with appropriate resources’, and reiterated the proposal for a Brussels office. This was done following the following year. Two affiliates, the GMB general union and the GPMU print union, also opened a Brussels office. As part of the restructuring of the TUC in 1994, most standing committees, including that for European Strategy, were abolished (Heery 1998) and a ‘Europe Monitoring Group’ was established.

As Rosamond has commented (1998: 131), ‘the TUC’s resources of information, knowledge and research capacity have enabled the General Council to accumulate “European” expertise over time [and] allowed the TUC’s leadership to define the nature of the European environment within which unions operate and to act as the main agenda setter within the union movement on questions of European integration’. The more focused role of the TUC at European level brought enhanced authority and influence, and this was clearly demonstrated with the succession to Gabaglio in 2003. Gabaglio himself commented laconically (2010: 148-9) that a decision was taken that the new general secretary should be a national union leader. This obviously made sense: the ETUC general secretary must manage an elaborate apparatus, maintain tight financial discipline and reconcile the complex geopolitical rivalries and differences of the affiliates; top leadership at national level tests and also develops capacities in all these respects. However, in the international trade union world it is normal first to decide on preferred candidates for top positions and then to define the criteria for selection. In this case, it seems the two names in the frame were Monks and Nicole Notat (until 2002 head of the CFDT, and who decided not to stand). The election of Monks was particularly significant because of the traditional implicit principle that the secretaries of the international and European trade union bodies should not come from their largest affiliates. However, this principle was already breached in 1995 when Bill Jordan was elected ICFTU general secretary, to be followed by Guy Ryder in 2002. As Brendan Barber, who succeeded Monks as TUC general secretary, quipped at the ITUC founding congress, ‘there is one area where Britain excels, and that is the export of trade unionists’.

In the more recent period, two issues deserve note. The first was the debate over the Constitutional Treaty. In the initial discussions in the Steering Committee in July 2004, Brendan Barber ‘described the mood in Great Britain as anti-Constitution. For trade unions the situation was specifically difficult because the UK government’s negative stance... on the social dimension in general and the Charter of Fundamental Rights in particular had led to real anger among trade unions.’ In September, Owen Tudor again stressed the degree of scepticism in Britain. Following the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty by the French and Dutch voters, Barber reiterated that ‘the TUC had not taken a position on the Constitution primarily because of disillusion with the UK government’s opposition to Social Europe’ (Executive Committee 14-15 June 2005).

A second key issue was the TUC approach to the free movement of labour after EU enlargement in 2004. Unlike the majority of old Member States, the UK imposed no transitional restrictions on workers from the accession countries. The TUC, and most of its affiliates, strongly supported immediate free movement, fearing that migrant workers would otherwise be forced to take on irregular work (Clark and Hardy 2011: 4). The government...
did impose restrictions on the entry of workers from Bulgaria and Romania after 2007, but this was condemned by the TUC, which pressed for a relaxation of the rules. British unions were notable for their efforts to represent the large, mainly Polish, migrant workforce, developing close relationships with their counterparts in the countries of origin (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2013).

This impressively solidary position was seemingly negated by the high-profile unofficial strike by British construction workers at the Lindsey oil refinery in 2009, against the refusal by an Italian contractor to employ local workers and its use of Italian and Portuguese posted workers on inferior wages and conditions. This was widely depicted as a xenophobic incident, not least by the Italian unions (Meardi 2012: 14-6). However, the strike was in effect a (largely successful) effort to defend collectively agreed conditions against attempts by a foreign service provider to undercut these (Barnard 2009); the issues thus reflected broader ETUC concerns that free movement without adequate social protections could result in social dumping. To counter misrepresentations, the Unite union issued a statement, with versions in French, German, Italian and Spanish: ‘this dispute is not about giving one nationality precedence over another in applying for jobs in the UK. In fact it is precisely the opposite. It is about giving all nationalities the same opportunity and ensuring that all nationalities benefit from the same terms and conditions, won through the efforts of trade unionists, once in employment in this country.’ Three ETUFs - the EFBWW, EMCEF and EMF - issued a joint statement describing the dispute as a ‘British Laval’, and the ETUC Steering committee adopted a resolution presenting this as a demonstration to create a ‘level playing field’ to regulate free movement. Almost certainly, the strong relationships which had developed between British unions and their European organisations enabled a potentially divisive conflict to be shaped along solidaristic lines. Whether or not ‘Brexit’ actually materialises, British unions may be expected to remain major players on the broader terrain of European trade unionism.

5. Conclusion

The account presented in this chapter could be viewed as a paradox: for much of the post-war period, British trade unionism was marked by a powerful (though certainly not unanimous) hostility to the project of European integration. This contrasted sharply with the posture of the initial ETUC affiliates from the countries of the original EEC. Yet British unions played a decisive role in shaping the new ETUC, often against the preferences of its other main founders.

The anti-EEC posture was never embraced by the TUC secretariat, and the dominant view of affiliates displayed a process of pragmatic adaptation to the reality of EU membership and the potential gains from EU regulation. With the loss of collective bargaining strength from the end of the 1970s and the hostility to trade unionism displayed by the Thatcher/Major governments between 1979 and 1997, but also the Blair/Brown governments which followed, British workers could be seen to benefit from the ‘social dimension’ that was particularly apparent in the Delors years. While much of the social legislation of the EU constituted a ‘lowest common denominator’ and provided little added value for most ETUC affiliates in western Europe, for unions in Britain – where statutory employee rights were traditionally extremely limited – the advantages in hard times were manifest. Hence the Working Time Directive of 1993 – bitterly opposed by the UK government, which
obtained the individual ‘opt-out’ from the 48-hour ceiling - provided the first universal reg-
ulation of working hours in the country. The European Works Council Directive of 1994 and
the Information and Consultation Directive of 2002 both represented radical innovations
in a country with no tradition of comprehensive employee representation machinery. In the
past, when union faith in the virtues of free collective bargaining was still undiminished,
such legislation would have been viewed with suspicion, if not hostility; now it was welcome.

In Britain there was a very different trade union culture from that of most other
ETUC affiliates. As several of those involved in the process explained, British unions were
not too worried about the textual detail of ETUC policies: they were more concerned with
the practical implications. Some of the debates within the ETUC seemed arcane. There was
a slow learning process but one in which mutual understanding increased on all sides.

As indicated above, for many years the TUC seemed something of an outsider in the
ETUC, but this changed radically. ‘I can’t remember, when I became TUC General Secretary
in 1993, any significant arguments with the ETUC’, said John Monks (interview, 25 April
2013): ‘We were the loyal of the loyal, we gave the general secretary the benefit of nearly all
doubts’. The TUC became one of the most involved and supportive ETUC affiliates.

Despite their overarching pragmatism, British unions have always seen European
organisation as an expression of the principle of solidarity. To an important extent, the early
insistence of leaders like Jack Jones on the most encompassing scope possible of the new
body was a reflection of this principle. As the current head of international and European
affairs expressed it (interview, Owen Tudor, 2 May 2013), ‘we have never seen the ETUC
as a channel for solely national interests being represented…. I think our approach to the
ETUC is not transactional, we see it as being we are part of a collective organisation and
therefore need to contribute to it…. Currently in the ETUC we’re seen as being ultra-loyal to
the leadership, and we keep trying to convince our colleagues in Europe that we’re not being
ultra-loyal to the leadership of the ETUC, we’re being ultra-loyal to the ETUC itself… I think
the general British trade union view of the European Trade Union Confederation is that it
is an institutional representation of the concept of worker solidarity, or union solidarity.’

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