Conclusion

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It is only in Europe that the trade union movement has acquired a truly transnational dimension. This publication opens the door to further research, and the study and interpretation of this historic journey will be an invaluable asset in the construction of European trade unionism today, as led by the work of the ETUC.

Democratic trade unionism has had an important part in European integration, particularly in relation to its capacity for social representativeness vis-à-vis the European Commission and European employers’ organisations. European integration, from the Schuman Plan in 1950 to the Maastricht Social Protocol in 1992 and beyond, has helped to change trade union action in the EU Member States, at different times and in different ways according to the specific history of each of these unions. The involvement of trade union confederations in the European project from the outset, and particularly since the creation of the ETUC, has given them the stature of European social partners with the capacity to strive for and to implement a ‘social Europe’ project; this in turn has contributed to the unique nature of the European Union.

There is no doubt that there have been many instances of resistance and contradiction throughout this process of integration, but the involvement of organised civil society and, in particular, the trade union movement in European decision-making on economic and social matters remains the central issue. The future direction of research into European trade unionism must therefore be more towards the analysis of its various levels of action in Europe (starting from the local level) and how they link together.

Historical research cannot be left on the sidelines in the study of the institutional processes of the EU. Furthermore, European trade unionism cannot be
reduced to a simple institutional lobby group, as this would deny its originality and specific features, such as the depth of its social project. An overly simplistic or modelled approach to social relations, ignoring the developments and changes wrought by history, is of only limited use. Equally inadequate would be a historical research restricted to the production of studies that merely set out the views, recommendations and positions of the national trade union federations and the ETUC, even though these may be comprehensive and reveal important contemporary challenges.

It would be more relevant to outline, with the necessary critical rigour, the objectives of European trade unionism through studying its various components and levels of action (from the company to the regional and interregional level, and from the national sphere to the EU area). The idea behind such an approach would be to carry out a comparison at the European level, fully assessing the impact of actions and instruments – such as the coordination between the ETUC and the European trade union federations, the Interregional Trade Union Councils or the European Works Councils – on the daily life of workers. This would require a serious consideration of the degree of influence of the European dimension on each specific trade union organisation. Carrying out such a comparison with the long-term perspective specific to the historian’s approach may prove useful in more than one respect: by looking closely at the issue of trade union identity in the workplace, by highlighting the importance of the confederal dimension in terms of reinforcing the weight of trade union action, and by helping to define the outlines of a multilevel social dialogue capable of achieving framework agreements appropriate to the transnational mobility of business.

If we want to see a stronger and more social Europe, which has an influence beyond the borders of the European Union, then a ‘virtuous’ dynamic of governance and social regulation is required. The rapid and manifold changes brought about by economic and financial globalisation have made this even more essential, and in this respect, it seems vital to recreate an acquis communautaire driven by everyone involved. This would allow us to begin a new era, offering a renewed social dynamic at European level. A lucid and retrospective analysis that reveals the reciprocal influences between European integration and the development of trade unionism could lend it meaning and legitimacy, and an understanding of this history would help to confront the present and future challenges facing Europe and its social development. In this way, the European trade union movement has an opportunity to consolidate its historic role as a social partner taking action for the benefit of all workers and citizens in Europe.