

## **Conclusion**

### **More Europe – now!**

### **The role of Europe's trade unions**

Peter Scherrer

The preceding contributions in this volume describe the many challenges facing not just the European political establishment, but anyone in a position to take action – and few would argue with the assertion that the trade unions are in just such a position when it comes to building a Europe rooted in social cohesion. The European trade unions must return again to the elementary question of how to achieve an integrated political, economic and social area known as Europe, and they must answer it convincingly. How far should and must the communitisation of social policy progress if we want to achieve a minimum standard of social security which is acceptable to all the Member States? How can we ensure that none of the European Union's workers lose out if their nation states join together in a single economic area? How can the trade unions coordinate wages effectively at European level? What do trade unions need to do in order to ensure that the EU's workers are not played off against each other in the quest for a decent job? Which measures are most likely to help refugees and immigrants fleeing war and/or poverty integrate successfully into the job market and society?

If trade unions want to have a say and ensure that any solutions found to the manifold problems we face are in the interests of all working people, and if they want to tread the boards of the political stage in one of the leading roles rather than a bit part, they need to do more to maintain and expand their influence. Given that their status as mass-membership organisations depends on large numbers of people being willing to pay dues, the individual trade unions which belong to the large and industry-wide umbrella associations must prioritise the acquisition of new members as an ongoing task, since their ability to negotiate wages correlates directly with their clout in the relevant economic sector. Small associations able to win industry round to their way of thinking on individual points because they represent professions whose members – even in small numbers – can hit whole industries or sectors where it hurts (e.g. train drivers and airline pilots) do not see themselves as political players, and policy-making is neither what they want to do nor what others want them to do. Assertive trade unions and their umbrella organisations are in a position to provide political and societal representation convincingly, effectively and for many; professional organisations are not.

Relying solely on statutory representation rules for public- and private-sector bodies as a guaranteed route to strong trade unions is likely to prove a misstep at the latest when a new government takes the helm and makes legislative amendments under the banner of reform which result in their overnight disappearance. In an era of successful populist movements ('gilets jaunes' and the like), trade unions are unable to rely on the potential for political mobilisation which they could formerly harness. Capacity-building efforts at local, regional and sectoral level, based on properly functioning social

dialogue structures, are therefore crucially important if trade unions want to retain their seat at the negotiating table in the long term, not only on wage-related issues but on all policy matters. It is also in the trade unions' interest to ensure that the employers' associations sitting across from them at this table have the necessary influence; the attitude (particularly among 'left-wing' trade unions) that social dialogue is pointless and superfluous is not entirely wide of the mark under current conditions, but it is also foolhardy, if not to say downright irresponsible. Trade unions benefit directly from concluding fruitful agreements (wage-related and otherwise) with employers on the basis of negotiations.

Forms of employment and labour relations are changing at a breath-taking pace; if they want to continue representing workers and enjoying their support, the trade unions must provide innovative responses to these changes (which include the significant and undoubtedly still growing number of people in 'precarious' jobs and changes to employment histories, *inter alia* as a result of digitalisation). Progress within Europe is very varied in this area, with the ETUC member organisations in the Nordic and Central European countries inarguably being better positioned – and although these organisations are lucky enough to have the financial clout to launch new member drives in these novel sectors of the economy, this is not the only reason why they are 'modernising' their approach to recruitment. The European trade unions must demand compulsory rules on digitalisation and artificial intelligence, and push these rules through at national and European level; if they want to remain credible, particularly among people working in the online or platform economy, non-binding ethical guidelines are simply not good enough.

Trade union executives and PR officers must also engage with these modernisation efforts. The urgent need for greater next-generation representation has long been discussed internally, and must be addressed post haste; the same is true as regards the need for a visible increase in the number of women sitting on decision-making bodies. Trade unions are no different to many other organisations, associations and public authorities in that good intentions often remain just that – intentions. Voluntary commitments which achieve nothing must be replaced by binding quotas which can easily be monitored, and trade unions must become younger and more female.

As in other mass-membership organisations, staffing policies are a particularly hot topic for trade union officials, congress delegates and members, and heated conversations are held among elected officials and those responsible for European and international cooperation whenever new executive board or secretariat members are announced or elected. The criteria used as a basis for these appointments should ideally relate to qualifications (trade union experience at national and European level, knowledge of languages) rather than the candidate's background, but when it comes down to it, the reasons why individuals are appointed are many and varied; a desire to maintain the political balance of power, a lack of viable alternatives (in the positive and negative sense), the need to preserve an equilibrium between different regions, and sometimes pure dumb luck (with makeshift solutions far from an unusual occurrence). It is rare to see instances where C-level appointments are the outcome of several years of careful planning and consideration, and yet the conclusion of joint agreements on a well-

coordinated and binding HR policy is one of the most urgent tasks facing the European trade union movement. Young trade union activists are keen to work within Europe's trade unions and to attend training courses organised by the member organisations and the European Trade Union Institute; they represent a pool of talent which could be assembled through the creation of certified training courses and then systematically drawn upon by the European and international trade union secretariats.

In the run-up to the 13<sup>th</sup> ETUC Congress held in October 2015, the question of how trade unions could mobilise themselves again and conduct successful campaigns was overheard in many corridor conversations. We may not have found the answer to this question over the three years since then, but developments are at least promising. The ETUC's pay rise campaign ('Europe needs a pay rise!') – long overdue in terms of its content – met with wide approval and active support, in particular by organisations working at the lower end of Europe's pay scale. In order to be successful, campaigns of this ilk need a well-laid plan and a generous flow of cash, but what they need most of all is for a single body to assume responsibility for them, and this is where the large organisations can leverage their position – by setting quantitative and qualitative benchmarks for wage agreements. The pay rise campaign could have achieved its full impact had wage policy objectives been coordinated properly (nominal pay rises, inflation plus productivity increase plus redistribution, as discussed for decades within the European trade union federations and writ large at conference after conference). If EU-wide campaigns are to serve any purpose at all, the ETUC member organisations must thrash out binding agreements between themselves; the 'Europe needs a pay rise!' campaign should have fed into the fight against the capitalist race to the bottom in terms of EU labour costs (a problem which has affected workers in large companies and smaller firms at the latest since the borders were opened up in the early 1990s). Trade unions must join together in solidarity (which must always be earned afresh) to oppose this trend, but campaigns for more solidarity presuppose agreements which are more binding in nature and therefore more dependable. The headline message of trade union policy is particularly apposite in the case of wage policy – yes: more Europe – now!

Europe must become a stronger global player, and trade unions can and must play a role in this process. Together we are strong, and that also applies to the Member States of the European Union – if we want to have a say in the way the world is run, we can only do so by acting as a team. China looms ever larger on our economic, trade policy and military radar, and the volatility of Trumpian politics across the pond means that success can only be achieved if we stick together. Once again, trade unions can make a key contribution by working in concert with their social partners – by saying yes to Europe at long last in the national sphere, so that action can be taken in the European sphere which benefits all of us.

Attitudes towards Eurobonds represent a useful litmus test of attitudes towards shared responsibility, since a willingness to assume joint liability within the euro area is an important (if not essential) indicator of a desire to go further in terms of European integration. Joint liability naturally also means joint policy-making and a ban on unilateral action which has not been agreed in advance; current political power groupings make this level of dependability impossible, but the trade unions must firmly

back this move towards communitised politics. Which brings us back round to the same point – yes to more Europe – now!

There can be no question about it – the bodies which represent Europe’s workers must speak out in favour of a proactive and sustainable industrial policy. What we want and need is European champions, and we can only create champions if we can compete on the global market with products which are energy-efficient, straightforward to recycle, easy on resources and competitive. A sustainable industrial policy must back renewable and clean energies, while at the same time offering alternatives for workers set to lose out as a result of these industrial cataclysms – the ecological transition must be a just transition, with no runners-up. Trade unions must agree to focus their policy work on the future, since the enormity of the environmental problems we face (climate change, pollution of the air, soil and water, species extinction, urban mobility) leaves us no option but to act quickly. Trade unions must espouse a sustainable and responsible policy for this and future generations to counter the bully-boy tactics of big business, which still operates on a quarterly basis in line with the financial markets. Germany’s Minister for the Economy recently outlined the country’s industrial policy goals in a document<sup>1</sup> which can only be described as staggeringly unrealistic and anachronistic, and the European Commission’s industrial policy recommendations also appear lacking in the face of the Member States’ insistence on being backward in coming forward – even though almost all the ‘ingredients’ of industrial production in Europe’s industrial nations depend on external factors (access to resources, energy supply, trade policy), meaning that there is very little scope for real action at national level. Once again, we must return to our siren call – yes to more Europe – now!, since only an EU-wide industrial policy can deliver long-term success at global level.

The aftershocks of the financial and economic crisis are indubitably still being felt in certain EU Member States, and this will continue to be the case for some time. An EU-wide unemployment insurance scheme would allow us to coordinate a joint response to economic crises of this kind in future and to mitigate their consequences. This is a trifling matter in some people’s opinion, but an important one nevertheless, and all trade unions must make more noise about it – at the same time, however, the community of the European trade unions must not be content with that alone. We need to take communitisation of social security seriously, meaning a guaranteed social safety net for everyone (in some cases for the first time). If the trade unions genuinely want to achieve upward convergence in the field of social policy, they must make no bones about calling for this process; the aim is not to impede or damage well-functioning systems, but to implement EU projects which improve the sub-standard systems in weaker countries. Trade unions therefore need to broaden their national frame of reference, and to find the courage to say yes to Europe and yes to solidarity (in word and deeds). Speaking in oversimplified terms, the EU Member States in the north and centre of the continent must be bolder in their attempts to push through European projects, and the Member States in the south of the continent must in return agree to a shift in trade union policy towards the binding and the dependable. The first item on the to-do list is to establish

---

1. <http://www.spiegel.de/plus/peter-altmaier-neue-strategie-fuer-industriepolitik-analyse-a-21b69ca6-a14c-4895-bdef-5fad00eed974>.

a consensual and mandatory framework for joint policy agreements between multiple competing organisations within a single country.

The national member organisations and the ETUC must cooperate much more closely and much more effectively on efforts to lobby the European Commission and the national governments, in particular the incumbent and incoming Council presidencies. The financial transaction tax and digital tax represent a further test of the trade unions' commitment to a common Europe; can they reach an agreement on the introduction of these taxes at EU level while refraining from the temptation to tolerate (or even uphold) tax shopping on their own home turf?

The European trade unions must speak out on behalf of Europe with authority and genuine feeling – not only in Brussels, but also within their own countries, within their own spheres of influence and in particular at the workplace!