Preface

Our study is the outcome of an approach to the authors by John Monks, who served as general secretary of the ETUC between 2003 and 2011. This was a crucial period of transition for the Confederation, and John rightly felt that lessons could be learned from this time which would still be relevant today. We agreed that the focus should not simply be on his own role during these eight years but should encompass more broadly the efforts of the ETUC to maintain an effective influence in what were uncertain, and politically and economically challenging, times. The European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) published a study (Degryse and Tilly 2013) to mark the 40th anniversary of the ETUC, but much of it covered the first three decades. We felt it would be useful to look broadly at the development of the ETUC in the twenty-first century; in other words, the years after the 1999 Congress in Helsinki. We were able to obtain the agreement of Bernadette Ségol to cover her period of office from 2011 to 2015. We were asked not to focus to the same extent on the term of office of Luca Visentini, so our detailed account ends in 2015. However, we could not reasonably ignore important developments since then. Thus we cover some more recent events, in particular in order to update the earlier narrative. Although the publication of this book coincides with the 50th anniversary of the ETUC, we do not purport to cover the whole half-century in any detail.

We received the backing of the ETUI in 2019 and we were able to interview a number of key actors at the Vienna ETUC Congress in May of that year. A few months afterwards, the world was transformed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Our programme of research visits was put on hold for what turned out to be almost two years and, given the original plan to complete this work in time for publication before the 2023 ETUC Congress, it had to be greatly abbreviated. We have had to rely much more than intended on archival research, in particular the documents of the congresses and the Steering and Executive Committees.

We have drawn considerably on the historical research reported by Christophe Degryse and Pierre Tilly and we gladly acknowledge our debt to their work. We also thank all those who have agreed to our requests for interviews (and in many cases have commented on drafts of our text) and the staff of the ETUI who have assisted us in our archival work. In addition, we are grateful for transcripts of some of the interviews coordinated for the ETUI by Christophe Degryse, Philippe Pochet and Sigfrido Ramírez Pérez. Our coverage of themes is necessarily selective, and perhaps idiosyncratic, to avoid too much overlap with the work of other researchers.

Both Philippe Pochet and Nicola Countouris made detailed comments on an earlier draft of our text, for which we are very grateful. Special thanks to John Monks, who suggested
that we should undertake this project, and who will almost certainly disagree with some of our assessments, as well as to Bernadette Ségol, though she also may dispute some of our arguments. We are very grateful to both for agreeing to write postscripts to this book.

We have decided to organise our text thematically, with each theme treated largely chronologically. The topics covered reflect in part the assessments of our key respondents, in part the weight of emphasis in the records and in part our own evaluation of the key issues confronting the ETUC. To avoid cluttering the text, we decided not to use footnotes. Where we quote foreign-language sources, the translations are our own.

We felt it inappropriate to attempt to write a conclusion in the standard sense. The work of the ETUC goes on, the challenges it faces continue to evolve and there is no consensus either within the organisation or among external observers regarding its strategies and their outcomes. We therefore offer a final chapter which addresses some of the key dilemmas and the responses to these, indicating where points of historical interpretation may legitimately diverge.

It may be true, as Santayana argued, that those who cannot learn from the past are condemned to repeat it. But history offers no easy lessons. What we hope our book provides is material for understanding both success and failure, and to appreciate how effective strategies can be tailored to challenging and changing circumstances.

Richard Hyman and Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick