

# **Bridging gaps Strengthening Social Europe**

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## **1. Phoenix**

“An irenic, pacific continent had risen, Phoenix-like, from the ashes of its murderous – suicidal – past” (Judt 2005: 5). Such is the conclusion reached by the British-American historian Tony Judt in his book on post-war European development.

The story of Europe’s unexpected recovery after 1945 is a miracle. The steady extension of institutionalised forms of intra-European cooperation has resulted in a post-national Europe that has learned the bitter lessons of the imperialistic, fascist, and communist aberrations that culminated in two world wars and authoritarian or dictatorial suppression. Judt regards the European Social Model as a hallmark of the EU signifying a fundamental distinction between Europe and the rest of the world. The commitment “to shield citizens from the hazards of misfortune or the market” (Judt 2005: 793) and the combination of a highly efficient capitalism with social security and political freedom form a unique transnational European entity that offers the world a “serviceable model” (Judt 2005: 800) for the future. Europe – such is our conclusion – is the most important political, economic, social, and cultural innovation of the 20th century.

This kind of praise for Europe and the EU as its political arm is not rare. And its validity is confirmed, interestingly and indirectly, by the rejection of European integration by a motley collection of nationalist, xenophobic and neo-liberal forces. A telling example is provided by one recent sample of national-liberal propaganda produced by British economists urging the UK to secede from the EU to escape over-regulation and social protectionism (Minford et al. 2005). The EU – according to these authors – is being steered in the wrong direction, and the constitutional treaty enshrining fundamental social rights, social cohesion and participation rights would merely cement these undesirable trends.

Acceptance of the European project by the intellectual left and rejection by the political right would be a good foundation upon which European trade unions could build, were it not for the scepticism and mistrust within their own ranks. Among workers, a transnational Europe gives rise to fears of job losses and social erosion, leading, not infrequently, to a desire for return to the seemingly safe harbour of the nation state. In some member states, indeed, parts of the trade union and political left have made a bogeyman out of the EU, seeing it as a neo-liberal project furthered by the European economic elite; and in France, for example, the call to reject the draft constitutional treaty proved successful. The current circumstances, then, in which some perceive the EU as socially overweening, while others see it as neo-liberal and socially aggressive, demonstrate an evident need to clarify the true nature of Europe.

## **2. The Fox**

The Ancients already had a proverb: “The fox knows many things but the hedgehog knows one important truth“. Today’s fox knows three things about Europe, and the hedgehog has one big idea.

### **2.1. Europe is also an outcome of the labour movement**

If we look back with the historians, and above all the great French masters, we will learn that Europe is not a geographical notion, but rather a cultural concept with secular roots

in Greek and Roman antiquity and spiritual-religious roots in Judaism and Christianity. The modern Europe did not emerge until the Enlightenment, however; it released science, culture and the arts, introduced democratic rights and parliamentarianism, completed the separation of Church and State, and, with the freedom to pursue economic activities, invented capitalism.

But European capitalism also brought to the fore a social counter-movement. Through this movement, in a long and dogged fight, the labour movement wrested social rights from capitalism. In this way tamed capitalism and the welfare state also became European inventions. The European Social Model, which takes on differing forms from one country to another, is the labour movement's contribution to the Europe of today. The EU consists of a mixture of liberal-capitalist, conservative-Christian, and social-progressive forces, and in this respect it differs not one iota from the nation states of Europe. Great Britain is not simply liberal, France not simply Statist, Italy not simply Catholic, while there is much more to the Nordic states than socialism; not a single member state is socialist through and through but the EU, if it were to find a way of assembling the most progressive cross-section of culture, civil society and responsibility for the environment, could actually turn out to be better than its parts.

## **2.2. Cyclical progress**

Every trade unionist knows that cycles are inherent to capitalist free-market regimes. These are the upward and downward economic trends and the long waves of epoch-making inventions which lead to the fall of old and the rise of new industries. As can currently be seen in the neo-liberal mainstream, such changes are always linked to a shift in the dominant ideology. In the triangle of market, state and civil society, varying combinations are the rule. Lasting changes to the economic and social fabric of capitalist free markets always go hand in hand with the disintegration of traditional structures and orders. And the name of the game today is deregulation. A few examples will suffice to demonstrate how radical such changes are, and how quickly we forget them. In the 1960s, the coal and steel industries were giants, and the financial industry was a dwarf; the textile and clothing industry was a behemoth and the tourism industry a gnome. Other industries, such as motor vehicle manufacturing, the machine tools industry or the chemical industry, were booming. The classical labour force was the centre of society, the trade unions were influential and, together with the state and capital, were involved in steering economic and social development. The Golden Age of western European post-war capitalism came to an end with the downswing since the middle of the 1980s, and was replaced with market radicalism with an Anglo-Saxon touch. Since then, social inequality has increased and a disregard for the knowledge, motivation and interests of workers has grown. This is the opposite of the "intelligent capitalism" with which John Monks (2006), General Secretary of the ETUC, contrasts radical capitalism. The trade unions have drawn a twofold conclusion from the vicissitudes of capitalist societies. On the one hand, there is the need to protect the losers of upheaval; on the other hand, there is the need to translate technical-scientific progress into social progress. This is a recurring task for trade unions. The EU too is marked by cyclical developments. National deregulation is indivisibly linked to European economic and monetary union, and it is imperative that a transnational re-regulation be achieved that meets the requirements of economic, social and ecological sustainability. This is, of course, no automatic process; it requires trade unions which seek to shape Europe.

### **2.3. Long-term trends**

As is already true of nation-state capitalism, two fundamental directions of movement may be discerned in the EU: the one moves outwards, the other inwards. These may also be called the internal and external conquests.

External conquest refers to the spatial extension of the EU to bring in ever more countries through the intake of new members or economic linkage with a growing number of states. Where previously the nation-state expanded by military-imperialistic means, the EU today extends its transnational empire thanks to its political and economic appeal. This process has by no means reached its end and the trade unions would be well advised to gear up, in good time, for further rounds of expansion and integration strategies.

The internal conquest refers to the inclusion of ever more areas of life in the market for goods and services. Sport and culture have become big industries; education and social services are being commercialised. Within the EU, the keyword is liberalisation, and its typical feature is its transnational character. Trade unions are thus faced with the task of transforming the commercialisation and de-nationalisation of such areas of life into a transnational system of social and cultural security.

### **3. The Hedgehog**

The ancient hedgehog was familiar with the old adage that war is too serious a matter to be left to the military. Today's hedgehog knows that achieving a socially, ecologically and economically sustainable Europe is a "mission impossible" for money and capital. His big idea is that anchoring the European Social Model is neither a troublesome duty nor an impossible challenge, but instead an incentive and fountain of youth for the revitalisation of trade unionism as a pan-European, transnational movement for social cohesion, economic responsibility and new technological trajectories. Our hedgehog has learned that an attempt to restore the European nation-state to its former strength would be useless and not desirable, because old rivalries and times of horror could return.

For trade unions, a unique historical opportunity is opening up to become a key actor in pushing forward a long wave of social, economic and ecological progress. Demographic change, climate change, and technological change create two scenarios: one of threat and one of hope for the future. The defence of threatened living and working conditions is part of trade unions' aspiration to protect; seeking to proactively shape change is part of trade unions' aim to safeguard the future and to better establish Europe; clean technologies and environmental industries which are fair to the aged, conserve resources, or are knowledge-oriented already exist today and will be available in the future, giving rise to new markets which create employment. The trade unions, and with them the workers, need have no fear that work will run out or that economic growth will come to an end.

True as it is that individual nation-states can blaze the trail towards a modern, socially sustainable society, it is equally certain that only the EU as a transnational alliance will have the necessary critical mass to lend it global resonance and radiance. And this is the important point, because the tight interdependence between economics, social issues, the climate and technology is now such that intact national islands have become few and far between. The need to act as Europe – i.e., over and above the nation state – cannot be denied, and can become a new source of strength for trade unions whose scope for

national action is continuously shrinking in the course of the Europeanisation of the economic area and labour markets.

Our hedgehog knows, then, that the Earth will not tumble over the brink, but that the future can be shaped; that efforts by individual states may be welcome, but that cross-border collective action is essential; and that trade unions are virtually predestined to play a central role at the heart of Europe. The trade unions act at the interface between working worlds and day-to-day lives; they are organisations of the masses with a pan-European organisational structure; and they can call upon a wealth of knowledge gained from historical experience. Who else has such excellent credentials? As IG Metall Chairman Jürgen Peters (2005) put it, “globalisation and Europeanisation have fundamentally changed the conditions for trade union policy”, and it now depends on whether the “Europeanisation backlog” can be reduced in order to develop a “guiding vision for Europe” and to become a “pro-European force”.

The European project is unfinished. Considering the lack of a perspective to be gained from any widespread tendency – even among workers – to turn back to a national identity, which is not seldom mixed with anti-foreign and anti-EU slogans, Europe offers trade unions scope for revitalisation. Mitigating insecure and sceptical workers’ worries about the future, fighting social exclusion, and opening up new living and working opportunities could lead to a renaissance of trade union strength. The integration of Europe is the “escape route out of its past and an insurance policy for the future”, says Tony Judt (2005: 734) — a quintessential truth that is also valid for trade unions if they seize on Europe as their own project.

## **4. European bridges**

Europe has at its disposal a wealth of common cultural and social values. Yet it must at the same time address its problems and challenges against the backdrop of a wide variety of different traditions and structures. There is a need to forge links and networks by means of adjustment, cooperation and coordination. This is true also of trade unions which, in order to represent social interests in Europe, must build bridges and streets to manage diversity. These are (a) bridges between the top and bottom of the social ladder; (b) crossing points between traditional and avant-garde milieus; (c) boulevards towards growth and employment; (d) bulwarks against overweening state and market forces; (e) avenues between the national and the European levels; and (f) bridges over seas.

### **4.1. Basic standards against class division**

The societal split between top and bottom has by no means been overcome. On the contrary, we can even identify new class distinctions. The most obvious change since the golden era of post-war capitalism, following in the wake of the neo-liberal hegemony, is the increase in the numbers of socially disadvantaged and discriminated workers who are pushed aside into the low-wage sector, into unemployment, and into the informal labour market. Social exclusion and poverty are the insignia of the new underclass. These developments can be traced back to the liberalisation of labour markets in the context of Europeanisation and globalisation. Across Europe and around the world, there is an oversupply of labour which contributes to a shift in comparative advantage in favour of emerging markets.

The trade union bridge to fighting social exclusion is the European Social Model (ESM). It is not a protectionist system in the sense that national labour markets are to be



cut off from intra-European migration. As can be seen from the example of Germany, formal barriers to the labour market lead to a flourishing informal labour market. No one is protected in this way, neither domestic workers nor immigrant workers. The European Social Model – and the ETUC supports this – advocates open labour markets in the EU, but seeks to control them via regulation. Based on the “Community Charter of Fundamental Rights”, the ESM is a complete package of basic standards; it is a safety net that should secure an appropriate level of earning and living opportunities for all. Its key components can be outlined as follows:

- An EU-wide system of minimum wages, whose level should be around 50% to 60% of the national average wage. In this way it should be possible to prevent people from slipping into poverty despite having work. We explicitly support the American academics Kochan und Shulman (2007: 5) in their call for “a new social contract”: “A bedrock principle of a modern labour market policy must be to ensure that all who work earn a living wage”.
- Binding rules about the maximum length of daily, weekly, and annual working time, as well as minimum rights to annual leave.
- Establishing a trans-European labour market free of discrimination by securing the same rights for all, including the protection of minorities, migrant workers, seasonal workers and undocumented workers.
- Enhanced opportunities to balance the obligations of work and family with the aim of ensuring that Europeans can be productive workers as well as good parents and community citizens.
- Participation rights in national and European companies as an element of a culture of industrial democracy. Information, consultation, and codetermination rights strengthen the democratic fabric of Europe, improve economic efficiency and contribute to social cohesion within the EU.
- The right for all to be included, without discrimination, in social security systems in cases of illness, unemployment and old age.
- Government responsibility to provide a social infrastructure which guarantees access for all to social and general services such as education, the arts, culture, transport, energy and postal services.

Such a system of basic standards should be an element of free collective bargaining – i.e., it should be subject to negotiation processes in which trade unions participate. The individual components are at different stages of development, but they are already so far developed that the completion of the system is no unattainably far-off goal.

#### **4.2. Traditional and avant-garde**

Studies of social strata in society demonstrate that there is a differentiation across class and national borders between authoritarian and petit-bourgeois milieus on the one hand, and a self-assured, self-responsible avant-garde on the other. This distinction is also true for the majority of the population, i.e., workers. Its special feature, however, is that the underclass has more or less resignedly given up. The trade union bridge must seek to do justice to the different interests and living situations of a multi-layered workforce by means of a mixture of specific differentiation and solidaristic interest generalisation. The underclass, in particular, must be provided with a wide range of helping measures

to enable them to escape resignation. Here, measures to improve the education of children from the underclass play an important role in improving their chances to shed traditionalistic constraints. The relationship between a precarious underclass and workers in the middle-class milieu is marked by mutual dependence: the more miserable the situation in the underclass, the stronger the downward drift of established workers. To put this differently: the greater the solidarity with those below, the better it is for all.

### **4.3. Smart growth strategy against unemployment**

Economic growth is vital for the elimination or reduction of unemployment. To rise above the threshold of jobless growth, the economy must grow by at least 2% annually. Of course, trade unions cannot uninhibitedly push for growth, and, for reasons of endangered sustainability, ecologically damaging growth must be excluded – but beyond that there is a large palette of technologies to embrace to promote the creation of new markets and new jobs. New technological trajectories aimed at reversing climate change and global warming; building up ecologically sound transportation systems and energy supplies; developing social services and social infrastructure; modernising education, cultural, and health institutions; further developing metropolitan centres into sustainable cities; or developing peace-keeping and peace-making observation systems are just a few examples which should suffice to illustrate the plausibility of the growth and employment potential lying in new technologies. Iain Begg und Allan Larsson (2007) refer to a new low-carbon growth concept and a new technological paradigm creating a wave of innovation and investment and generating employment and a better environment. They show that the economic, environmental, and social dimensions constitute an integral whole, and it is the duty of trade unions to push for investments in human capital, social services and public infrastructure: “Tackling climate change and social exclusion and building a stronger knowledge base is the pro-growth strategy of our time” (Begg and Larsson 2007: 7). In nearly all branches of the economy there is an enormous growth potential, and by advocating industry-specific programmes for investment in capital equipment and human capital, the respective sectoral unions could help pave the way towards employment security. The opportunities are growing for the implementation of smart growth strategies and the trade unions should become their advocates.

### **4.4. Trade unions as a civil society bulwark against an overpowering state and market**

The triangle of the state, the market and civil society is subject to changing alliances and power relationships. It is important that the actors of civil society, among which trade unions stand out in particular, should be able to build upon solid self-confidence and support from the population, so that they may effectively fulfil their role as a corrective agent vis-à-vis the state and the market.

The market all too often fails to deliver the good deeds it promises, because capitalism’s inherent tendency to centralise asymmetrical market power and the resulting supremacy of money and profit gives rise to amoral markets; it therefore needs a regulating counterweight. The capacity of the democratic state to fulfil this function is limited. Even the state always runs the danger of abusing its political power or simply taking poor decisions. One need not go as far as Marx, who saw the state as the vehicle of the ruling class to oppress the working class, in order to recognise that equating the state with the common good is quite naïve. Limiting both the market failure which results from money grubbing as well as the state failure which results from the greed for power

thus requires the corrective intervention of civil society. The trade unions should keep more distance from the state, have more faith in themselves, and forge alliances with other civil society actors.

#### **4.5. Coordination as a bridge between the national and the European levels**

This is an old ailment of the labour movement. While international solidarity was always celebrated in papers, flags and on the first of May, it was often forgotten in the humdrum of daily life. Though the following description could well be contemporary, it actually goes back to a union internationalist in 1924: “The workers have international organisations, hold international congresses, pass numerous and high-sounding resolutions. Nonetheless, they continue to restrict their activities to the national arenas” (Fimmen 1924: 104). What was then at most only a gleam in the eyes of his far-sighted contemporaries – namely a pan-European economic order with a single market and a common currency – is reality today. But this has consequences, because national trade unionism excludes itself from the process of transforming national rule-setting into a European social model. Put differently, social regulation and trade union activism must follow the market – that is, previously from the local to the national level, and today from the national to the European level. The trade unions are in a similar situation to national governments: European integration inevitably brings de-nationalisation and a lasting erosion of national sovereignty in its wake. The loss of national autonomy can be compensated only by pooled sovereignty at the European level.

Today, the trade unions’ European organisations have achieved a far higher degree of unity and stability than in the 1920s, but there is still a gap between the dense network of national presence and the European network. The more quickly national business cycles dissolve into wider European economic movements, and the more national industries are assimilated into European industries, the more trade union interest representation requires a strong European component. Trade union structures are still inconsistent with the economic and political reality of the EU. On the way to a transnational architecture, three phases of the Europeanisation of trade union associations and policy can be identified:

- Coordination is the supranational linking of trade union policy fields. The best-known example is wage coordination. At the European level, the trade unions have agreed a rule whereby no national trade union may agree to pay increases which are less than the sum of inflation adjustment and productivity growth. Coordination is thus pan-European rule-making and national implementation.
- A multi-level or multi-layer trade union network is the objectively appropriate distribution of competences and duties among local, regional, national and European trade union units. So one could imagine that the creation of a transnational European Social Model which takes the form of a safety net of high minimum standards would become the top priority of the ETUC. Equally, the development of the Social Dialogue at the peak political level of the EU, as well as at the European sectoral level, would be the sphere of authority of the trade unions’ European organisations. The tough job of collective bargaining would remain the task of the national unions, and company-specific regulations would be up to the local or regional trade union organisations. A multi-level system is thus an organisational structure based on a networked division of labour.

- A European trade union which, unlike coordination and multi-level organisation, is a far-off prospect would be the consolidation of organisational power by means of the incorporation of national organisations. Just as, historically, independent local and regional trade union organisations were brought together into national organisations, the national organisations could in future unite into European membership-based organisations. Pioneers who could blaze the trail for others are sectors which are marked by a high degree of supranational integration together with a high degree of social homogeneity. One example would be the railways.

These three phases capture the development of trade union integration in ascending order; this integration will become ever more necessary as the Europeanisation of politics, economies and society progresses, and it becomes ever more possible as the mutual trust between trade unions grows.

#### **4.6. Bridges over seas**

In Tuscany, the old centre of the Italian textile and clothing industry, Chinese entrepreneurs have bought factories, and now run them as sweatshops in which Chinese workers – one hears of at least 25,000 workers, most of them women – are producing Italian products. This is in effect the importation of early-age capitalist exploitation – that is, jobs without social rights. We are of the opinion that it should be the other way around: European trade unions should put their efforts into creating a European Social Model which can serve as a benchmark for other world regions. Large parts of the world are in a miserable state: dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, which uncontrollably exploit both mankind and nature and suppress their peoples' demands for democratic and social participation, are the rule rather than the exception. Here, the experience of the European labour movement could help. Its historical achievement shows that capitalist regimes can be tamed by flanking them with social measures while their economic performance is enhanced at the same time. This is a message which could also find agreement elsewhere.

Europe is unique because of its social heritage and 50-year experience in shaping a transnational entity. Europe is also the core region of the trade union world. As in no other region, trade unions in Europe can build upon a broad social foothold, institutionally protected rights, and experience in supranational social rule-making. They must therefore also shoulder a great deal of responsibility for social conditions in other parts of the world. Even in their own interest, because an ideal world is in the long run impossible as a national or a European entity, trade unions should build bridges beyond Europe. There is a broad range of possibilities:

- Parallel to partnership agreements between the EU and other world regions, trade union partnerships could be set up.
- The ILO could be expanded to serve as a platform for the worldwide enforcement of fundamental social rights.
- Agreements between trade unions and multinational companies on the establishment of global works councils and the commitment to social responsibility could help to improve working conditions in many parts of the world.
- Improving international cooperation between trade unions and increasing the appreciation of the work of the ITUC are further opportunities to make the world a more humane place.

## **5. New moral inspiration**

It is an old experience of the labour movement that trade unions cannot always be militant; nor can they always be conciliatory. Both stances are necessary: negotiating compromises with employers and enduring conflicts. The capacity to enter into external conflict corresponds with the internal capacity to mobilise – that is, with members' willingness to stand up for their own interests. Risking conflict and organising mobilisation is always related to a just cause. The trade unions are gaining new moral authority for two reasons:

### **5.1. Proposals to shape the future**

A purely defensive position, or in other words, a kind of negative solidarity in which everyone rejects something unanimously, is a longstanding trade union battle strategy; it is a necessary but not sufficient condition, however. What must be added are trade union proposals for the solution to a problem or for shaping the future. Here, the trade unions have gained new authority. This could most clearly be seen in the conflict surrounding the EU Services Directive. At the core of the massive trade union protest actions was the rejection of a neo-liberal principle which stood in fundamental opposition to the European Social Model. The superiority of the European Social Model over pure market radicalism rests on a canon of just, humane, democratic and social values. With their smart growth strategy for employment and environmental protection, their future-oriented industrial policy scenarios, and the European Social Model's embedded social security net, the trade unions have the solid building blocks to pave the way towards a new utopian or moral inspiration.

### **5.2. Neoliberal deficiencies**

The deficiencies of neoliberal societal and economic policy are becoming more and more apparent. White-collar crime seems to be an elemental part of neoliberal doctrine, as does the exclusion of growing parts of the population from societal and social life. A new dimension of social marginalisation has emerged. Millions of workers are pushed aside into unemployment, the informal labour market, and low-wage sectors. If their income from social support payments or poorly paid work is no longer enough to enable them to live above a cultural existential minimum, then this is a case of fundamental market failure and is a moral scandal. The capitalism of creative destruction is producing a new underclass and is destroying the future of coming generations. Not only the defensive protective function but also the offensive, future-oriented element of a yet to be transnationally established European Social Model make it clear: it is a precaution against social exclusion and a framework for the democratic inclusion in social life for all. In place of the neoliberal propensity to creative destruction, the unions should further develop their potential to create utopias.

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## Discussion and Working Papers

*Béla Galgóczi, Maarten Keune and Andrew Watt*

**Relocation: Challenges for European trade unions**

*WP 2007.03*

*Thomas Blanke and Jürgen Hoffmann*

**Towards a European Social Model Preconditions, difficulties and prospects of a European social policy**

*WP 2007.02*

*Maarten Keune and Maria Jepsen*

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