

# TRADE UNIONS AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN EUROPE

## Country Study Finland

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## TRADE UNIONS IN FINLAND

The history of unionising in Finland stretches back to the late 19th century, when the first worker's unions were founded in the 1880's in the country's industry centres. A salient feature in the early unions was the strong presence of employer interests. The first union leaders were either employers themselves, or members of the educated classes, and the central idea of such unionising was moderate reformism aimed to defuse potential for labour market conflicts, and to reduce worker interest towards socialist politics.

A new wave of unionising soon buried this type of conciliatory trade unionism. The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the spread of socialist trade unions across the country. The process culminated in 1907 with the founding of *Suomen Ammattijärjestö*, the first umbrella organisation for industrial trade unions. From the outset, these unions adopted a socialist outlook on the labour market based on the Marxist concept of class struggle. Consequently, they developed an integral relationship to the major political force of Finnish socialism, the Finnish Social Democratic Party.

With this grounding orientation, conflict with employers fearful of the spread of socialist ideas was a given. As a countermove, the employers began early on to organise their own employers' unions and specific policies to coordinate countermeasures to unionising and industrial conflict. One counter-

measure was to form wage cartels, in the form of multi-employer agreements on industrial wages, and jointly coordinated and distributed lists of known troublemakers, agitators, and strikers.

The Finnish Civil War in 1918 marked the final culmination of the early phase of contest. Inspired and encouraged by the Bolshevik coup in Russia, the radical wing of the Social Democrats in Finland set out to take power with the help of the paramilitary Red Guards, strongly based on the personnel of the existing trade unions. Against them rose the non-socialist Whites, with their own paramilitaries, the Civic Guards. The result was a crushing defeat for the Reds, the escape of many of their cadres to Soviet Russia, a wave of White terror against the remaining Reds, and the founding of the Finnish Communist Party in Moscow in August, 1918.

The aftermath of the Civil War came to define the interwar Finnish republic and labour market. Throughout the early part of the 20th century, the main goal of the unions was to establish themselves as recognised representatives of worker interests at large, and to make collective bargaining and collective agreements the standard of Finnish industrial life. Employers would counter with anti-union policies. These policies in action included

an industrialist-backed countrywide strike-breaker organisation, collective propaganda aimed at the workers, the creation of competing, non-socialist unions, industrial espionage, and efforts to create and maintain centralised files and blacklists so companies could find and isolate potential trouble-makers.

Towards the 1930's, the trade unions came under an increasingly concerted attack by employers and their organisations, who aimed to extinguish socialist trade unionism altogether. The methods were already familiar from union-busting and strike-breaking efforts tried and tested in the United States and Sweden. At its heyday in the early 1930's, the Finnish strike-breaker organisation *Yhtymä Vientirauha – Koncernen Exportfreden* counted some 34,000 members in its ranks. At the same time, the socialist trade union movement itself became a zone of conflict between its by now traditional leaders, the social democrats, and the communists, who were operating in Finland clandestinely under numerous and shifting front organisations. The struggle would continue long after the Second World War, and would shape the organisational culture within the trade unions.<sup>1</sup>

The Second World War ushered in the modern era of Finnish labour market relations and the birth of the modern trilateral system, where the state acts as a mediator between the employer and trade unions. A key precondition was the employers' grudging acceptance of socialist trade unions as negotiating partners and the principle of collective agreements binding entire sectors in 1940.<sup>2</sup>

After the Second World War, rivalry between social democrats and communists continued to characterise trade union politics. The struggle eventually led to the communists becoming marginalised within trade unions, and their influence limited to the handful of unions they were able to dominate. Yet, the strong association between trade unions and the left-wing parties, and a consequent enduring mistrust towards the unions among the political right have endured within for Finnish labour market policies.

## MODERN FINNISH RIGHT-WING POPULISM AND RIGHT-WING RADICALISM

The Cold War era foreign political position of Finland strongly curtailed the political prospects of right-wing populist parties and movements. The only notable and moderately successful of them was the *Suomen Maaseudun Puolue* (SMP, Finish Rural Party), which represented non-socialist, centre-right populism through rhetoric seeking to portray the party as an agent of the ordinary small farmers, workers and entrepreneurs. The SMP was able to gain significant parliamentary electoral successes in 1970 and 1983, but failure in government and continuous infighting led to a steady downward spiral in its fortunes.

In 1995, the party was declared bankrupt. The party leadership immediately set up a new party, *Perussuomalaiset* (PS; The Finns Party, formerly True Finns), with a single MP at the time. Under the next chair, Timo Soini, the party grew into a characteristically right-wing populist movement with a rhetorical mix of conservatism, xenophobia, and Euroscepticism (Finland joined the EU in 1995). The Finns Party grew during the late 1990's into the early 2000's, an era marked by increasingly voiced concerns about the sustainability of the Nordic welfare state, and an interlinked rise of exclusionary nationalism, both of which have helped right-wing populist movements thrive. The central point of their rhetoric has been the threat to the welfare state by increasing immigration and ethnic diversity, thought to lead to increased crime, decline of national solidarity, and other social problems, and to be an unsustainable strain on the welfare system.<sup>3</sup>

The political breakthrough came in the parliamentary elections of 2011, after which the party has consistently enjoyed a seemingly stable level of support among the voters. After the 2015 parliamentary elections, the party attained its greatest success so far, entering the centre-right government of prime minister Juha Sipilä (*Suomen Keskusta*, Kesk, Finnish Centre Party). During the same period, PS party membership grew from the minuscule 2,700 in 2004 to an almost quadruple figure of 9,500 in 2016. Support for the party remained equally high throughout the 2010's and into the 2020's, even though changes

<sup>1</sup> Silvennoinen, Oula (2018): "Demokratins framgångshistoria? Skogsindustrin, arbetsmarknaden och en fascistisk samhällssyn, 1918–1940", in: Meinander, H. / Östberg, K. / Karonen, P. (Eds.): *Demokratins drivkrafter. Kontext och särdrag i Finlands och Sveriges demokrati 1890–2020*, Stockholm, SLS/Appell Förlag, pp. 204–209.

<sup>2</sup> Bergholm, Tapio (2005): *Sopimusyhteiskunnan synty I. Työehtosopimusten läpimurrosta yleislakoon, SAK 1944–1956*, Helsinki, Otava, pp. 55–56.

<sup>3</sup> Pyrhönen, Niko Johannes (2015): *The True Colors of Finnish Welfare Nationalism. Consolidation of Neo-Populist Advocacy as a Resonant Collective Identity through Mobilization of Exclusionary Narratives of Blue-and White Solidarity*, SSKH Skrifter 38, Swedish School of Social Science, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, pp. 24–28.

in party outlook and internal dynamics have been considerable.<sup>4</sup>

PS's participation in the government proved short-lived, as Soini was ousted from the position of chair in the party conference of 2017. He was replaced by Jussi Halla-aho, a former Member of the European Parliament (MEP) for the party, who had gained influence and a devoted base of supporters as a racist and pro-authoritarian blogger.<sup>5</sup> Halla-aho was unbearable as a partner to other government coalition parties at the time. This quickly caused the entire Finns Party to split: Acting Finns Party government ministers resigned from the party, set up a new one, and continued in the government. The Finns Party, now led by Halla-aho, moved to the opposition.

Despite all the drama, Halla-aho soon proved markedly successful in restoring the level of support previously enjoyed by the Finns Party. Under his leadership, the party moved from Soini's right-wing populism into more radical rhetoric, making it a typical European right-wing radical party with distinctly authoritarian, anti-immigrant, and anti-establishment themes. This was in line with Mr. Halla-aho's statements to Finnish news media in the spring of 2017, when he stated that the party needs to become more radical and learn from the more successful European radical nationalist parties.<sup>6</sup>

Currently, the Finns Party has 38 MPs in the parliament, which means it is currently tied as the second largest party in the parliament alongside the moderate-right *Kansallinen Kokoomus* (Kok.; National Coalition Party). The largest group is the *Suomen Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue* (SDP; Social Democrats) with 40 MPs. In the European parliament, the Finns Party is a member of the far-right Identity and Democracy (ID) group, currently represented by two MEPs.

The present-day Finns Party continues to define itself as national-conservative or, as the party program states, a "patriotic and Christian-social movement". Its current politics are characterised by anti-immigration-, anti-EU-, and anti-environmentalist themes, as well as with identity politics seeking

to cast the political left and liberals as antitheses to what the Finns Party stands for. The party has continued to attract a coterie of far-right characters, antivaxxers, cultural warriors and conspiracy believers and occasionally made common cause with neo-Nazis and other fringe far-right actors.

Ever since its creation, the Finns Party has acted as broad umbrella for right-wing populist, as well as right-wing radical themes. Some party actives are notorious for their close ties to neo-Nazi, white supremacist, and fascist groups, and members of the party, its leadership included, occasionally make public appearances in far right/conspiracist events. The party leadership has been notably passive in expelling these elements, usually only doing so after public outcries have threatened to turn them into net liabilities for the party. With its open-door policy towards even the extremist right, the party has been able to be the absolutely most credible funnel for every hue of right-wing radicals to political power and influence. Among the consequences is that no rival group has been able to establish a level of support and stability that would come even close to that enjoyed by the Finns Party.<sup>7</sup>

The interlocutors interviewed for this study – all of them active trade union functionaries – were uniform in their assessment that other right-wing populist, radical, and far right parties and movements are not readily discernible among the trade union membership. Such groups consist of the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement and its successor organisations, as well as the Finns Party splinter groups *Valta Kuuluu Kansalle* (VKK; Power Belongs to the People), *Vapauden Liitto* (VL; Freedom Alliance), and the fascist *Sininmusta Liike* (SML; Blue-and-Black Movement), which are all tiny despite their status as registered parties. The Finns Party remains an absolute dominant force among the Finnish far right in general, as the only successful right-wing populist/radical party to enjoy consistent electoral success and a consequent stability, with no comparable peers. Thus, any discussion of right-wing populism and the trade unions in Finland has to concentrate on the Finns Party and its complex and contradictory relationship to the unions.

<sup>4</sup> Palonen, Emilia / Saaremaa, Tuija (Eds.) (2017): *Jätkät & jytkyt. Perussuomalaiset ja populismin retoriikka*, Vastapaino, Tampere.

<sup>5</sup> Sundqvist, Vesa (2012): "KKO kovensi Halla-ahon tuomiota", in: *yle*, 6.6.2012, <https://yle.fi/a/3-6171365>.

<sup>6</sup> Waris, Olli (2017): "Halla-aho MTV:lle korkeimmalta oikeudelta saamastaan tuomiosta: 'Poliittinen paine ohjasi'", in: *iltalehti*, 19.4.2017, <https://www.iltalehti.fi/politiikka/a/201704192200104748>.

<sup>7</sup> At the moment, there are several splinter groups, all composed of individuals (e.g. far right activists, anti-vaxxers, pro-Russia contrarians, and conspiracy theory enthusiasts) who entered politics as Finns Party candidates but later left on their own initiative or were expelled from the party. These groups attempt to rival the Finns Party. None of them have been able to build similarly steady bases of support, and will, in all likelihood, remain minuscule and thus unable to challenge the Finns Party's dominance in any way.

## “THE FINNS PARTY” AND THE TRADE UNIONS

To date, the Finns Party line towards the trade union movement in general, and trade union politics, has been weakly and inconsistently articulated. All the interlocutors within the trade unions interviewed for this study said that the party has failed to formulate coherent policies relevant to worker or trade union issues. “They tend to say one thing, do another, and perhaps think of a third”, says one respondent. There is thus both an awareness of the not inconsiderable latent support for the Finns Party among trade union membership, as well as an understanding that, so far, the party has been unwilling or unable to capitalise on its successes. The rise of the party into a position within the trade union movement that would reflect its ascendancy in countrywide politics has been anticipated for years. So far, it has failed to materialise.<sup>8</sup>

According to the party program, the emphasis of the Finns Party “is on the value of the ordinary Finnish citizens and their role and voice in politics, economy and culture of Finland. The focus is neither on any particular professions nor ‘interest groups’ but on the Finnish nation as a whole.”<sup>9</sup> The Finnish-language original further states that the party positions itself “above outdated and unjust interest-group politics”.<sup>10</sup>

This is a hardly veiled reference to traditional trade unions politics. Such an attempt to keep oneself above the fray of everyday politics is most readily explained by the membership and voter structure of the Finns Party itself. According to a 2017 study by the University of Turku, roughly half of the party members in 2016 were employed, and one third were retired. Furthermore, the Finns Party members were overwhelmingly (75 %) male, and overwhelmingly (70 %) employed in private businesses. While the membership was relatively young compared to most other parties, the share of the unemployed was the highest and the share of students among the lowest. The party members were characterised by a slightly lower median income than Finns in general, as well as by lower than

average education and a relatively high number of entrepreneurs among the membership.<sup>11</sup>

The Finns Party counts among its members and supporters a good share of people who also form the core of trades-union membership, especially in male-dominated sectors. Yet there are a number of factors that keep it from becoming a worker’s party in any traditional sense of the term – despite former chair Timo Soini’s adage that the Finns Party would be “a worker’s party without socialism”. One inhibiting factor is the strong attachment, inherited from the predecessor SMP, to the ethos of the independent small farmer and small entrepreneur. The Finns Party has a strong wing of entrepreneurs with a traditionally hostile outlook towards trade unions and the political left, who consequently make occasional outbursts of anti-trades-union rhetoric from the ranks.

On the one hand, the Finns Party trade union activists clearly identify with traditional trade union political themes, such as the importance of upholding the principles of collective bargaining and collective agreements. In practical politics within the trade unions, says one interlocutor, “they are in a similar way as the representatives of any other party on the side of an ordinary worker.”

The result of voicing trade union issues through right-wing populist or radical right vocabulary can be an awkward union of traditional worker’s movement language and anti-left-wing incitement. “Part of the politicians under the leadership of [social democratic] prime minister Sanna Marin are offering as an alternative stricter legislation [with] mini[mum] wages [and] criminalisation of underpayment”, says a March 2021 bulletin of *Peruspuurtajat*, an association of Finns Party trade union actives. “This would move collective bargaining through the parliament and into the courts of law — It is truly sad to watch how the social democrats are demanding equality, improvement in the position of women, and the narrowing of wage differentials, yet remain silent when the employers in an unprecedented manner attack the conditions of employment.”<sup>12</sup>

8 Huusko, Markku (2020): “Valtaako perussuomalaiset pian ay-liikkeen?”, in: *Uusi Suomi*, 30.1.2020, <https://www.uusisuomi.fi/uutiset/valtaako-perussuomalaiset-pianay-liikkeen-nousua-duunaripireissa-kuvataan-jo-dramaattiseksi/5663e9c6-f5c9-4fad-a43d-4b4761136609>.

9 Perussuomalaiset (2018): “The Finns Party Principle Program”, 19.10.2018, [https://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Periaateohjelma-19.10.2018\\_SU\\_In-English.pdf](https://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Periaateohjelma-19.10.2018_SU_In-English.pdf)

10 Perussuomalaiset (2018): “Perussuomalaiset RP: Periaateohjelma”, 19.10.2018, <https://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/periaateohjelma.pdf>. Finnish original: “Perussuomalaisten huomion keskiössä ei ole yksittäinen ammattikunta tai muu suppea eturyhmä vaan suomalaiset kokonaisuudessaan. Olemme vanhanaikaisen ja epäoikeudenmukaisen eturyhmäpolitiikan yläpuolella.”

11 Koiranen, Ilkka / Koivula, Aki / Saarinen, Arttu / Räsänen, Pekka (2017): *Puolueiden rakenteet ja jäsenistön verkostot*, Kunnallisalan Kehittämissäätiön Tutkimusjulkaisu, 103, KAKS, pp. 19–20, 29.

12 Perussuomalaiset (2021): “Peruspuurtajat: Ay-liikkeen on noustava taistelemaan työehtosopimusten puolesta”, 30.3.2021, Press Release. <https://www.perussuomalaiset.fi/ajankohtaista/peruspuurtajat-ay-liikkeen-on-noustava-taistelemaan-tyoehdosopimusten-puolesta/>. Finnish original: “Pääministeri Sanna Marinin johdolla osa politiikoista tarjoaa vaihtoehdoksi tiukempaa lainsäädäntöä minipalkkoineen alipalkkauksen kriminaliointeineen [sic] – On todella surullista seurata, kuinka Marinin demarit yhtäällä vaativat tasa-arvoa, naisten aseman parantamista ja palkkaerojen pienentämistä, mutta toisaalla ovat hiiren hiljaa kun näiden alojen työehtojen kimppuun käydään ennenkuulumattomalla tavalla työnantajien toimesta.”



An interlocutor from *Suomen Ammattiliittojen Keskusjärjestö* (SAK; Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions) says there is a clear potential for the Finns Party affiliation among their members. “According to questionnaire studies we’ve done among our members, there is a significant structural potential for the Finns Party”, but when one looks at the level of individual unions and their politics, “it is surprisingly invisible – it is as if they were somehow embarrassed or ashamed of their party affiliation.” All the interlocutors agreed that the Finns Party has been uniformly unable to turn their potential support into actual gains across the trade union movement. Where they do have leadership positions in unions, they are either underrepresented, or wield a substandard level of influence, tending to go along with more experienced and determined actors.

As potential sources for this impotence, the interlocutors cite organisational inexperience and a resulting incompetence, possible lack of interest among the Finns Party voters towards traditional trade unions issues, even sheer disinterest within the party towards the “tedium” of trade union politics, not easily turned into identity political themes or representing commanding terrain in the culture wars. Perhaps, said one interlocutor, there are even doubts within the party whether the trade union movement is even a particularly valuable target worth taking over.

The interlocutors shared a sense of the divisive potential of some of the key themes of the Finns Party among the trade union membership. The party rhetoric is openly racist, portraying immigration as a root cause for a variety of social problems. It is easy to see how such positions can aggravate conflicts in increasingly multi-cultural trade unions, factory floors, and the job market. Neither is the basic premise of Finns Party populist rhetoric of trade unions as bastions of a pampered elite of the political left apt to defuse conflict. However, a consistent push for confrontation seems largely absent to the interlocutors. “I don’t really know what they [Finns party members and supporters] think of the world”, says one of them, “or what they actually want.”

## TOWARDS FURTHER UNEASY COEXISTENCE

The Finns Party has not shown particular eagerness to engage voters with themes related to trade union or their issues. The likely reason for this is that the party voter base remains ambiguous in their relationship to trade unions and unionising in general. While the voter base contains a significant number of traditional

blue-collar voters, another significant bloc are the small businessmen and self-employed entrepreneurs, whose rhetoric is often sharply anti-left and anti-union in tone. Identity politics has proved to be the dominant driver, making anti-left rhetoric much less problematic than a direct assault on the unions as such, also considering that many party members are also union members.<sup>13</sup>

This is, in all likelihood, the major reason why there has been little in the way of coordinated efforts within the trade union movement at countering the right: the threat hasn’t really materialised. By way of their constitutions, Finnish trade unions tend to be well secured against takeover attempts. This is a legacy from the long period of struggle between the social democrats and the communists, who aggressively tried to expand their influence within the movement from the 1920s onwards.

When it comes to effective counter-strategies, campaigns to activate union members to vote for union issues clearly have potential, says one interlocutor. For example, “[i]n one of them, we were able to achieve a notable shift in opinion among our members, and demonstrate that through a questionnaire study.” Of key importance is not to let the right-wing populists or radical right determine the agenda: “That way we can have a discussion about actual working-life issues, not over immigration.”

One way of defusing the potential of right-wing populist and radical right parties is also to engage with them as part of normal intercourse between the unions and parties. Such communication also gives insight into the developments within the right-wing populists and radical right themselves. According to one interlocutor from inside the *Toimihenkilökeskusjärjestö* (STTK; The Finnish Confederation of Professionals) changes in the Finns Party orientation towards trade unions have been restrained but discernible during the recent years. Nowadays, organisations like the STTK are in regular contact with the Finns Party leadership to hear their opinions and engage them in discussion regarding policies and social issues.

Yet, meaningful discussion is often hampered by the programmatic vagueness of the Finns Party. The party tends to lack coherent political policies for engaging in wide and complicated social and structural issues in a consistent manner. This could make the Finns Party something of a force to be reckoned with but so far it

<sup>13</sup> Koiranen, I., Koivula, A., Saarinen, A. & Räsänen, P.: *Puolueiden rakenteet ja jäsenistön verkostot*, *Kunnallisalan Kehittämissäätiön Tutkimusjulkaisu 103* (KAKS, 2017), 19–20, 29.

has been impotent due to its own volatility and unpredictability. Moreover, its tendency to concentrate on posturing in lieu of consistent policy-making and minor details in lieu of overall views have limited its efficacy. The message of the party regarding core trade unions issues, like collective bargaining, is often obscure and timid. This may change in the future but so far, the Finns Party are a challenge, not an outright danger to trade unions, says the interlocutor.

The Finns Party has proven adept at stirring up feelings of resentment necessary to mobilise their potential supporters to vote. This has helped them achieve a string of electoral successes and maintain a steady support level on both sides of 15 percentage points in polls between elections. However, the party has proven singularly unable to govern or to exercise influence proportional to its size outside government. Thus far, the singular Finns Party venture into government from 2015 to 2017 ended with voter disappointment and a split party. Within the trade unions, the Finns Party has not gained its standing among the membership by speaking about trade union issues but by incessantly haranguing about conservative values and identity. It is thus conceivable that the current party leadership does not see a need to depart from this fundamental strategy that so far has served them so well.

In the parliament and on lower levels of politics and governance, the Finns Party tends to limit itself to authoritarian posturing, rhetoric, and hand waving instead of policy-making. Inciting rhetoric is perceived as the most potent and is the only tool consequently applied to any and every problem. This is the mindset of culture wars, not of the reality of parliamentary and coalition politics. The Finnish multi-party system only reinforces this source of impotence. To make anything happen in the Finnish system, one almost always needs to be able to gather temporary majorities by collaborating with other parties. Convincing others to vote with you and your party is the bread and butter of conventional politics; the Finns Party has so far failed to master this basic skill.

Can this change? The interlocutors were all cautiously sceptical towards the idea of rapid changes in the Finnish situation. “If there were some kind of a strong Finns Party presence building up among some union, I would have heard of it by now”, says one interlocutor. Yet, for trade union activists pondering these questions, introspection is a good starting point. Austerity policies enacted under governments where left-wing parties participate, and general feelings of disappointment “in traditional worker’s parties’ ability to actually further the key issues affecting worker’s lives” are the “primordial soup” from which

right-wing populist and radical movements draw their strength. “There are many answers to be found from taking a look into a mirror”, one of the interlocutors concludes.

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