

# Unions and Democracy in Europe: Background, Challenges and Agenda

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A banner image showing a sunset sky with a silhouette of a statue on a pedestal in the foreground.

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# **Unions and democracy in Europe: background, challenges and agenda<sup>1</sup>**

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## **1. Introduction**

Around Europe, trade unions have made, in the past and still make today, important contributions to the emergence and functioning of national democracies. However, national democracies and the participation of trade unions in democratic processes currently face a number of challenges. These challenges originate, on the one hand, in ongoing processes of transnationalisation of the economy, European integration and the increased intertwining of corporate interests and government. They stem, on the other hand, from the difficulties faced by unions in adjusting to structural changes in the economy and to changing and increasingly differentiated employee interests, from declining membership levels, as well as from unions' diminishing access to the state and predominantly national focus.

This paper will present a brief overview of the historical role unions have played in democracy (section 2) and the challenges faced today (section 3). By way of conclusion, section 4 will outline a number of policy issues related to the strengthening of unions' role in democracy.

## **2. Unions and democracy**

The labor movement has played an important role in the emergence and further development of democracy across Europe. Historically, trade unions fervently pushed for political democracy as a way to influence the policies of the state, seen as the major agent of social change, and hence as a main vehicle for improving trade union rights and the working and living conditions of the working class. Much of this 'struggle for the state' started, in continental Europe, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century when many unions had abandoned

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Kurt Vandaele for useful comments.

revolutionary stances and embraced evolutionary reform.<sup>2</sup> Because the working class represented such a large proportion of the population, transferring (part of) class conflict from the market into the political sphere, thereby seeking to solve the ‘social question’ through democracy, seemed a promising prospect. In many cases, this process included both the forging of intimate links with social-democratic parties and substantial industrial conflict. The initial focus of the struggle was frequently achievement of universal franchise – though at this stage ‘universal’ frequently referred to men alone – but other important bones of contention included freedom of association, various elements of workplace and industrial democracy, union participation in political processes, etc.

But trade unions have played a key role in democratization processes in the more recent past also. In several southern European countries unions were important in the opposition to the dictatorships and the democratic transitions of the 1970s. At the same time, it was a major achievement of these democratic transitions that they allowed trade unions to become strong and autonomous participants in democracy. Somewhat later, in several of the former state-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, trade unions played a key part in the turn towards democracy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The best-known example is of course Solidarnosc, which spearheaded the turn to democracy in Poland in the 1980s and was, in this respect, a frontrunner for the entire region. Another example is the participation of both the ‘old’ trade union (SZOT, later MSZOSZ) and a ‘new’ trade union (LIGA) in the negotiated transition in Hungary, institutionalized in the Roundtable Talks (Bozóki 2002). And freedom of association was indeed one of the democratic demands included in the transition process in the region in general.

Over time, on the one hand, trade unions became one of the main representatives of civil society, facilitating the participation of citizens in the democratic political system, and contributing to democracy being more than an elite game or a once-every-four-years event by continuously inserting the concerns of large parts of the population into the political debate. Unions play an important part in national politics in many countries by promoting solidarity and redistribution, counteracting the dominance of market-based ideologies and contributing to the pluralism of ideas by representing an alternative voice, as well as representing the interests of the weaker parts of society, often extending well beyond their

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<sup>2</sup> For a historical account of the development of trade unions in different European countries see e.g. Crouch 1993; Hyman 2001; Ost 2008.

immediate membership. All of this they do through protest and mobilization, participation in neo-corporatist arrangements that negotiate, formulate and implement labour market and welfare state policies, through links with (social-democratic) political parties, etc.

On the other hand, unions reduce the power asymmetry between relatively powerless individual workers and more powerful employers and corporations by providing for collective representation of workers' interests and promoting workplace democracy. Through a variety of means, including collective bargaining, enterprise-level workers' participation mechanisms and industrial action, they have been important in holding corporations accountable when they subject citizens to autocratic rule in the production process or colonize the democratic process by pecuniary means (Erne 2008: 1; also Crouch 2004). These means complement the role of national states and legislation in this respect. Indeed, trade unions have in this way played an important role in increasing the legitimacy of democracy (Skocpol 2003; Erne 2008).

At the same time, although unions have played such roles across Europe, the specific characteristics of the various national trade union movements, the way they struggled for democracy, as well as the contribution they make to the functioning of democracy, today depend to a large extent on the national-historical context in which they emerged and function (Crouch 1993). Indeed, a substantial variation can be observed in terms of national industrial relations systems and the role of trade unions therein. One dimension of these differences concerns the membership level, the extent to which the union movement is unified or fragmented, the extent to which workers are covered by collective agreements, the level at which collective bargaining takes place, workers participation issues, etc. While having broader repercussions as well, these indicators have first of all an effect on the power of unions to constrain corporations. Another dimension, more closely linked to the functioning of national democracies, concerns the extent to which unions pursue market, class, and/or social interests (Hyman 2001); the extent to which they are engaged in collective (instead of individual) democratic participation; and the extent to which they are incorporated into neo-corporatist structures that perform intermediary functions between the state and society. Such neo-corporatist structures are traditionally most developed in the Nordic countries, the Benelux countries, Germany and Austria, but have been acquiring importance more recently also in, for example, Spain and Slovenia. In the UK, the Baltic countries and eastern Europe, on the contrary, they are scarcely developed. It could be

argued that in the countries where neo-corporatist arrangements are most developed, trade unions and other interest groups have been able to contribute more effectively to the functioning of democracy and the resolution of (potential) societal conflicts than in those where they are less developed. Indeed, even though in certain cases the democratic contribution of neo-corporatist institutions can be questioned, in particular when they protect insiders at the expense of outsiders and place particular interests above societal interests, in general these problems are far less important than the support that neo-corporatist institutions offer to effective democracy (Crouch 2006).

### **3. Challenges**

The role of trade unions in national democracies – diverse as this role may be from one European country to another – today faces a number of interrelated challenges. Three of these challenges will be outlined here: the internationalization of the economy and the rise of the transnational company; the character of European integration and the shift of decision-making power from the national to the European level; and the difficulties trade unions face in terms of membership and adapting to structural changes. The first two of these circumstances, in particular, represent a challenge not to trade unions alone but also to national democracies as such. What is more, because of the diversity of national systems, the nature and extent of these challenges may differ from one country to another.

#### *3.1 The internationalization of the economy and the rise of the transnational company*

The ongoing internationalisation of the economy and the related rising power of transnational corporations pose serious problems for democracy and for the role of trade unions therein. Indeed, a number of authors have referred to the rising power of transnational corporations as the ‘death of democracy’ (Wood 2006: 33). Others see it as part of a broader trend towards ‘post-democracy’ in which politics and government are gradually slipping back into the control of privileged elites, in which the institutions of representative democracy are increasingly becoming irrelevant and in which transnational corporations are a key actor and driving force (Crouch 2004).

The issue here is that, to an important extent, transnational corporations elude the control of national democracies, while at the same time influencing the policies and strategies of the actors of these national democracies. This is the case for several reasons.

One is the increased dependence of countries on such corporations for investment and jobs. Countries are increasingly competing for transnational investment and have to cater therefore (at least to some extent) to the interests of these transnational corporations. More and more states perform the role of a 'competition state' or what one might call a post-Fordist 'Schumpeterian workfare state' (Jessop 1994: 103). One of the effects of this trend is that it induces regime competition. A clear example of such processes is the negotiations that have taken place on investment projects between car and car parts manufacturers on the one hand and national and local governments of the Visegrad countries (Poland Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic) on the other. These negotiations revolve largely around the question of which country and region manages to make itself most attractive to the investor by offering, for example, lower taxes, better infrastructure, better business services, lower labour standards, or better skilled labour. Trade unions too are pressured to engage in this process to some extent, by moderating demands on wages and working conditions or promising a conflict-free environment. In this way, transnational corporations set the rules of the game and gain some degree of leverage over national and local policies as well as over trade union strategies. This limits the degree of freedom for democratic governments and for trade unions alike. At the same time, transnational corporations, being the decisively international actors they are, escape democratic control to a large extent, given that there is no such thing as a global democratic government and that the institutions that populate the weakly institutionalized global polity (e.g. international agencies) are weighted heavily towards corporate interests (Crouch forthcoming).

Along similar lines, transnational corporations have also increased their leverage over trade unions within the corporation in a variety of ways, limiting their power to hold them accountable and to constrain their actions. They have fomented competition for investment between different companies or sites belonging to the corporation, often located in different countries, through benchmarking exercises aimed at lowering costs and increasing flexibility. In this way pressure is put on trade unions in terms of their demands on pay and working conditions.

Similarly, corporations make good use of the availability of exit options for capital. Capital has always had more scope than has labour to pursue its interests by choosing exit options and this 'mobility differential' has strongly increased in the last two decades

(Hoffmann 2006). This increase is related to a number of structural changes, including prominently the creation of the Single Market and European enlargement, which have offered companies scope for reorganising their production processes throughout Europe (ibid.). The increased exit options for capital have strengthened its power position towards labour. This has led to the relocation of certain activities, especially labour-intensive manufacturing activities, from higher-wage countries to lower-wage countries, though the weight of such relocations in total FDI remains for the moment limited. Through such relocations, as well as through outsourcing and the fragmentation of global supply chains, transnational corporations limit the effective control of unions over their activities and their possibilities to effectively represent individual employees.<sup>3</sup>

At least as important as actual relocation, however, is the increased use that companies make of the *threat* of relocation (Keune 2008). By threatening to relocate their present activities or to make their future investments elsewhere, companies increasingly and successfully demand concessions from workers in terms of wage moderation, increased flexibility and extension of working time. In exchange they offer to refrain from using their exit option and in this way to provide some sort of job security. The recent wave of this type of concession bargaining was initiated by Siemens in Germany when it demanded concessions in exchange for not relocating its mobile phone production to one of the new member states, an example that was subsequently followed by many other companies throughout Europe. Nor is this kind of scenario restricted to the western European countries, for it increasingly affects the new member states also as transnational corporations threaten to move their activities even further east. The increased exit options for capital, resulting from, among other things, European economic integration and enlargement thus weaken the bargaining strength of workers and lead to downward pressures on wages and working conditions.

### 3.2 *European integration*

European integration has a number of consequences for the functioning of European democracies and for the respective role of trade unions. European integration has been largely dominated by ‘negative integration’, i.e. measures that serve to increase market

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<sup>3</sup> On the characteristics and dimensions of relocation in recent years see the contributions to Galgóczi et al. (2006).

integration by eliminating national restraints on trade and distortions of competition, while much less weight is given to 'positive integration' which refers to the development of common European policies to shape the conditions under which markets operate (Scharpf 1996, 2002).<sup>4</sup> This particular form of integration has fomented the above-discussed trend towards internationalization of the economy and the rise of the transnational company, leading, in particular, to the strengthening of regime competition and exit options for capital.

Part and parcel of the integration project has further been that member states have, in recent decades, transferred much of their sovereignty concerning regulation of the economy to the European level. Trade and competition policies, for example, are largely determined by the European Commission. In the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), what is more, a total of now 15 countries share a single currency, a single central bank and a single economic policy framework.<sup>5</sup> One major effect of EMU is that individual countries entering monetary union lose a number of major instruments for adjustment to economic imbalances and shocks, in particular the exchange rate and the interest rate. Under EMU these issues have become competences of the European Central Bank (ECB) which sets a common policy for all EMU members. In addition, EMU sets more or less hard criteria for inflation, public debt and budget deficits. In this way, EMU represents a new stage of transfer of sovereignty to the European level and has (or will have in the prospective members) a major influence on national economies, labour markets and welfare states (Dyson 2002, 2006).

The transfer of these key competences from the national to the European level places them, to an important extent, beyond the control of national democratic processes, putting them in the hands of European processes and actors, including inter-governmental decision-making, the European Parliament, European Commissioners and other European civil servants, the independent European Central Bank, and the European Court of Justice. The democratic quality of these European actors and processes and of the European project as such is subject to much criticism and scepticism. Indeed, there is an enormous body of literature discussing the democratic deficit of the EU (e.g. Heritier 1999; Follesdal and Hix

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<sup>4</sup> 'Negative integration' refers to measures that serve to increase market integration by eliminating national restraints on trade and distortions of competition, while 'positive integration', which refers to the development of common European policies to shape the conditions under which markets operate, has been much more limited (Scharpf 1996).

<sup>5</sup> This number of countries will increase substantially in the coming years since all new EU members are obliged to join EMU.

2005). More fundamentally, it is often argued that Europe cannot be democratised because of the absence of a truly European *demos*, an encompassing European identity or European intermediary organisations.<sup>6</sup>

For our present purpose, it is important to point out that European integration does not entail the reduced influence of national parliaments alone but also that of national trade unions which often used to influence such formerly nationally determined policies through links with political parties, through neo-corporatist processes or through protest. Since trade unions remain organised largely at the national level, they have a much harder time influencing European policies, and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and the various sectoral European Industry Federations do not succeed in making up for this deficit. They are involved in several forms of European Social Dialogue but this does not provide them with much effective influence, in particular where economic issues are concerned. Hence, at the European level the democratic role of trade unions is much more limited than at the domestic level in many countries. On the contrary, private interests and organised employers have alternative channels to influence European policies and, unlike the trade unions, are accordingly not dependent on European Social Dialogue in this respect (Schäfer and Streeck 2008). They employ numerous well-resourced lobby organisations which play an important role in Brussels' politics, placing unions in a position of relative disadvantage.

### *3.3 Membership and structural changes*

One of the main challenges faced by trade unions in Europe is that of a declining membership and difficulties in adapting to structural changes. Trade union membership declined between 1995 and 2004 from one third to one quarter of European workers (European Commission 2006). Major membership losses occurred first of all in the new member states, where in several countries membership declined by 50 percent or more; but also in Austria, Germany, Portugal, Ireland and Greece membership rates fell by between 20 and 30 percent. In the remaining countries small declines or even minor increases (Malta, Luxembourg) can be observed. Membership has become more concentrated in the public sector, which is now the bastion of European trade unionism (Phelan 2007). Major diversity prevails between countries, however, and today membership

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<sup>6</sup> See Erne (2008) for a discussion of these issues.

ranges from 8 percent in France to 80 percent in Denmark. Not that membership necessarily equals influence: the French and Spanish unions, for example, have low membership rates (8 and 16 percent respectively) and yet have substantial power in their respective national contexts. What is more, the coverage of collective agreements is often much higher than membership levels would suggest (e.g. membership is around 25 percent in the Netherlands while the coverage of collective agreement is over 80 percent). Indeed, the influence of unions often surpasses their membership levels because of their mobilization power or because of state-determined extension mechanisms or institutional positions in companies or higher-level structures. Even so, the virtually generalized decline of membership points towards a decline in union power and in its capacity to play its part in democratic processes.

For this decline a number of reasons can be suggested, often related to structural changes in the economy and the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism (Waddington and Hoffmann 2000; Phelan 2007). They include the diminishing weight in the economy of the traditional core constituencies of trade unions, i.e. male blue-collar industrial workers; the growing weight of hard-to-organise workers, i.e. workers in the service sector, employed on flexible contracts or as dependent self-employed, or workers in small enterprises. Furthermore, trade unions today operate in an ideological and political context often quite hostile to them and in which they have less access than previously to the state through alliances with political parties (ibid.). In addition, some see a broader societal trend towards individualization and a differentiation of employee interests as a factor undermining trade union recruitment efforts. In the new member states, in particular, unions face difficulties in retaining or recruiting members, partly because of their perceived links to the state-socialist system and partly on account of the profound economic restructuring and precarious labour market situation following the change to capitalism. Finally, as already mentioned above, trade unions still operate largely within national borders, which contrasts with the ongoing process of European integration and transnationalisation of the economy.

#### **4. Strengthening the democratic role of unions in Europe**

From the above analysis it has become clear that unions have played an important role in European democracies but also that this role is currently under pressure from a number of challenges. This observation has first to be nuanced by pointing out that in most European

countries unions certainly continue to play a key role and remain of great importance for the quality of European democracies. Secondly, the fact that trade unions face serious challenges does not mean that there is less need for the functions they perform. Using the European Social Survey, D'Art and Turner (2008: 184) show that "An overwhelming majority (74 percent) of respondents believed that employees need the protection of strong trade unions." This includes the majority of non-union members (69 percent) as well as service-sector employees. Indeed, the authors conclude, although trade unions have been swimming against the prevailing economic and ideological currents, the traditional functions provided by trade unions are still much in demand (ibid.: 185), and this represents an important opportunity.

Still, how to respond to the challenges and demands unions face is no easy question. Most attempts to answer this question focus on strategies for trade union revitalization (Frege and Kelly 2004; Phelan 2007). Behrens et al. (2004: 20-24) identify four dimensions along which such revitalization can occur: the membership dimension, referring to increasing and diversifying membership, including non-traditional groups; the economic dimension, referring to the increase of the economic leverage of unions and the achievement of improvements in terms of wages, benefits and the distribution of wealth in general; the political dimension, concerning the influence unions have on policy-making at all levels of government, including the European Union; and the institutional dimension which covers the unions' organizational structures and governance, as well as internal dynamics. How unions can shape their answers and strategies on each of these dimensions depends again on the specific challenges they face and the national institutional context in which they operate. Hence, no attempt will be made here to outline a comprehensive trade union agenda. Rather, we will outline a number of broad strategic orientations concerning trade union strategies and their contribution to the quality of democracy.

*An alternative voice.* A first consideration here is that unions can play a valuable role by increasing the plurality of ideas in the political debate. In the presence of increasing tendencies towards a *pensée unique* of market ideologies, unions are well placed to represent an alternative voice in the debate. Increasing the plurality of ideas is already, by itself, a positive contribution to the democratic process. It is also a chance to re-introduce basic social concerns into policy-making at the national and in particular at the European level. Especially the European integration process and European-level policy-making are in

need of politicization and democratization and unions can play a vital role in this (Erne 2008). This may, however, require a change of strategy from the unions and in particular from their main European representative, the ETUC. With a few exceptions, the ETUC has largely aimed to influence European political processes by participating in social dialogue and other deliberative processes and lobby activities concerning European initiatives, and much less by means of protest and mobilization around its own proposals and alternatives. This is understandable because of the still limited interest and involvement of national unions in European issues and European activities, because of the constitution of the ETUC as a confederation of national unions which has to work on the basis of compromises between diverging national interests, as well as because of the ETUC's limited resources. Still, it does represent a one-sided engagement with European politics and makes the unions vulnerable to an 'elitist embrace' (Hyman 2005: 24). Hence it might be useful to take a greater distance from the European elites and to set the union movement's European agenda more autonomously, articulating the interests of the constituents and of the vulnerable and the weak in Europe, thereby further politicizing European politics and enriching the political debate. A precondition for this, however, would be more material and political support and involvement from its constituents.

*International trade union cooperation.* A point closely related to the previous one is that industrial relations for the moment remain largely a national affair, so that national interests dominate trade union agendas. However, the key industrial relations issues – pay, working conditions, welfare policies and others – are increasingly influenced by the transnationalisation of economic activity and European integration. The challenges represented by these developments all point to the need for trade unions to strengthen international cooperation within the union movement. Considerable cooperation of this kind already takes place within the framework of the ETUC, the European Industry Federations (EIFs), regional cross-border trade union cooperation and the European Works Councils (EWCs). However, much of this cooperation remains rather shallow as the various national unions adopt, in the first instance, a national perspective and then consider European issues largely from such a national viewpoint. For example, many efforts have been made to strengthen the coordination of collective bargaining among unions in Europe, especially at the sectoral level, to provide, among other things, a common answer to the strategies of transnational corporations. However, such coordination is for the moment largely limited to the exchange of information that can help unions to bargain in a more

informed manner. While this is important in its own way, for example in enabling unions to gain a better picture of capital strategies and to become aware of attempts to play workers in different countries off against each other, it still represents a decidedly national approach on the part of unions. Hence, in order to strengthen their position both towards transnational corporations and towards the European politics that increasingly influence national outcomes, national unions could do well to intensify such cooperation based on common goals and to build a true European trade union identity to complement the national one.

*New alliances.* Another approach to dealing with the challenges outlined above is the forging of new alliances (or renewing alliances) with non-union actors. One option here is to rebuild alliances with leftist or social-democratic parties. Unions in many countries used to have strong links to such parties and provided political personnel for them, thus making an input into the political system and influencing politics. In most countries these links have been weakened in recent decades as centre-left parties moved closer to the centre of the political spectrum and took increasing care not to appear as extended arms of trade unions, whose membership and potential votes are shrinking (Streeck and Hassel 2003). At the same time also unions were seeking more independence, but they may now wish to rethink their strategy on this and to try to re-establish their former links including, necessarily, attempts to pull social democracy away from the centre again, or to form alliances with the new left parties that have been gaining importance in several European countries. Union membership may be declining but in most countries it is still sufficiently large to carry considerable weight in electoral processes, providing unions with a bargaining chip towards political parties. At the same time, given the volatility of voting behaviour in recent years, it is becoming more difficult for unions to credibly 'offer' the votes of their members (ibid.).

New alliances are also being established between trade unions and the global justice movement (Della Porta 2007; Hälker and Vellay 2006) with which unions share objectives and political positions in relation to both transnational corporations and politics. Both, for example, criticize the EU's democratic deficit, its market-oriented policies and its failure to build Europe from below, and both adopt a critical stance towards exploitation by transnationals. What is more, many global justice activists are trade union members and unions are important participants in events like the European Social Forum or networks like Attac (ibid.). All of this indicates the potential for further cooperation between the two

movements which also have a lot to learn from one another. For trade unions the global justice movement can be an inspiration in the development of a new trade union discourse. The global justice movement has also proven better able to speak the language of young people, to apply new organizational forms and to mobilise. Hence, for trade unions, alliances with this movement represent opportunities to reach out to a new public, to act in innovative ways and to strengthen its mobilization capacity.

*Membership.* Finally, unions must seek, and have been seeking, a turnaround in the decline of membership so as to retain their key position in European democracies. Unions increasingly focus on organizing the organized, freeing up resources for this purpose and engaging in organizational reform and the provision of new services to deal with membership decline (Heery and Adler 2004; Waddington 2005). More and more the American organizing model is used as an example, first of all in Great Britain but increasingly in other European countries as well (Hälker and Vellay 2006; Heery and Adler 2004). In addition, numerous innovative experiments are implemented, focusing especially on the private service sector and on young people, examples being the establishment of a union for the self-employed in the Netherlands, the organizing efforts within the Lidl chain around Europe, the organization of eastern European migrant workers in the UK, etc. For the moment, however, while there have been individual cases of success, these efforts have not so far, overall, served to turn the tide of trade union membership losses. Though the recipe for membership improvement has not yet been discovered, what is clear is that more radical efforts and more resources are needed in this respect. The needs identified above – for an alternative union voice, for international union cooperation and for new alliances – could well prove important in support of such efforts.

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