



The unions and the relaunching of European social policy

Introduction

An analysis of the role of the unions in promoting a European social policy in the 1970s may be a useful way both of assessing whether social partners are able to exert pressure on governments to shift their attention towards the social dynamics of integration, and of providing food for thought on the length of the route that social policy had to travel in Europe, and how obstacle-strewn was the path taken by the social forces towards launching a dialogue with the Community institutions. The creation of Cedefop in 1975 can be regarded as one of the main achievements of the pressures exerted and claims advanced by the trade unions in their efforts to bring about greater visibility within the EEC and to promote the development of a European policy for employment and vocational training.

This research, conducted at the International Institute of Social History (IISH) of Amsterdam ⁽¹⁾ and the archives of the Council of Ministers and the Commission in Brussels, has concentrated mainly on the 1970s. It was from the Hague Summit of 1969 and in particular the drafting of the Werner Plan on the creation of an economic and monetary union, that the Community Institutions and European governments, faced with growing unemployment and a serious economic recession, began to draw up the outlines of a social policy paying due attention to employment – a policy not seen as part and parcel of economic integration but as a goal in its own right – and took a wide range of initiatives in the sector of employment and vocational training ⁽²⁾.

The origins of European social policy

Apart from the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), whose founding Treaty contained a considerable number of articles devoted to the welfare of workers and their re-employment following the restructuring

of enterprises, and which gave union representatives adequate representation within the High Authority and the Advisory Committee (Mechi, 1994), the Treaties of Rome had allotted only a marginal role to social policy, regarding it more as an effect of the creation of an integrated market than a goal to be pursued in its own right (Ciampani, 1995a and 2001; Degimbe, 1999). The very concept of social policy seemed complex and diverse, differing from region to region and from actor to actor: for the trade unions and, to some extent, the European institutions, this term covered various aspects of welfare policy, ranging from labour force protection mechanisms to the pension system; for governments it was a way of pursuing specific national interests. The Italian government, for instance, with its long tradition of social diplomacy, considered the development of a European policy for employment to be a necessity if the problem of unemployment, particularly serious in the south of Italy, was to be resolved.

The few paragraphs of the Treaty establishing the principle of free movement of workers within the Community and the institution of a European Social Fund, together with specific measures to guarantee equal pay for men and women, were a concession on the part of the European Governments to the strong pressure exerted by Italian representatives in the Val Duchesse negotiations. The European nations nevertheless maintained control and administered the social effects of economic integration at a national level, preferring to sign bilateral agreements rather than developing a Community-wide employment policy. The Treaty made no provision, moreover, for a political intervention mechanism: Article 118 merely entrusted the Commission with the task of 'promoting close cooperation' among the Member States through analysis, consultation and opinions on employment problems, the right to work, working conditions, vocational training and social security systems



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The question of European trade unions' approach towards vocational training is an interesting example of a broader issue, involving both the role played by non-governmental actors in shaping the social dimension of the integration process, and the need to develop a social dialogue in the Community. In this context, the establishment of Cedefop in 1975 can be considered one of the main achievements of the protracted pressure and requests from the European trade unions to be better represented in the EC and to develop a series of initiatives aimed at shaping a common European social policy in the field of employment and vocational training.

⁽¹⁾ The author thanks Lorenzo Mechi and Francesco Petri of the University of Padua for the documents found at IISH of Amsterdam.

⁽²⁾ For an analysis of the historiographic debate on European social policy, see Geyer, 2000; Hantrais, 2000; Kleinman, 2001; Kowalsky, 2000; Ivor and Springer, 2001; Vandamme (ed), 1984.



(Dølvik, 1999, p. 99), giving the Commission freedom of initiative and governments full control over social policies.

During the 1960s, social questions were not completely overlooked, partly due to the efforts of the Commission and the Economic and Social Committee (ESC), which were particularly active in calling for the promotion of a Community social policy. In practice, however, the social component of integration was swept to one side by the overwhelming interests of France and Germany, directed towards regulating the Common Agricultural Policy and free trade in industrial goods based on the principle of 'synchronisation'. What was in fact institutionalised was a permanent system of *do ut des* - 'give and take'. Just one illustration: the regulations on the free movement of workers were not brought into force until 1968, thanks to the efforts of the Italian Commissioner Lionello Levi Sandri, the prime mover of Regulation 1612/68 on freedom of movement for workers. Another illustration: for the first 10 years of its life the European Social Fund, which was active from 1960, had a minimal amount at its disposal, just ECU 420 million, most of which was earmarked for Italy. The European unions strongly criticised the work of the Fund, as evidenced by a memorandum drafted in October 1969 on the eve of the first reform of the Social Fund, emphasising the limited nature of its interventions: 'The automatism of its interventions, the rigidity of its structure, the complexity of its mechanism, the delays generated by its *a posteriori* criteria for reimbursement, among other factors, have meant that the Fund interventions have been frittered away, without it being possible to coordinate them in a Community perspective' (IISH, 1969).

The half-hearted interest displayed by the creators of the Community in the social component of European construction was reflected both in the exclusion of the unions from the negotiations for the signature of the Treaty of Rome, despite the constant and urgent requests to take part (IISH et al., 1955; Barnouin, 1986; Ciampani, 1995b; Dølvik, 1999; Pasture, 2001), and in the actual role of the body given the task of acting as spokesman for the social partners in Brussels: the ESC, an advisory body that did not receive the right of initiative until 1972 (Var-sori, 2000). For their part, European unions

could not say they were satisfied with the limited role assigned by the Treaties of Rome to the social forces, confined as it was to consultation, which could hardly be interpreted as incisive participation in European integration.

The unions' repeated requests to be represented within the Commission or on the Board of Directors of the European Investment Bank remained unheard. In 1964 the Vice President of the Commission, Sicco Mansholt, on the occasion of a meeting with the Executive Committee of the European Trade Union Secretariat (ETUS) ⁽³⁾, reiterated his firm opposition to institutionalising the co-operation with the union movement, preferring what he saw as more fruitful informal contacts ⁽⁴⁾.

Up to 1967 the Community social dialogue developed exclusively within the advisory committees whose task it was to assist the Commission in tackling the different issues relating to the working world - one of those committees being on vocational training, set up in 1963 - and within the joint committees, consisting of representatives of the unions and employers (Degimbe, 1999, p. 114).

The reasons for this rejection varied in nature: alongside the Commission's desire to retain control of the still embryonic development of social policy, there was the issue of whether the Trade Union Secretariat was truly representative. The rifts within the union movement, reflecting the divisions and tensions brought about by the cold war in the international system (to cite only one instance, the split of the Confédération Générale du Travail, CGT, in France from the Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro, CGIL, in Italy), but also the profoundly different approaches and policies of the various federations, had weakened the role and image of the social forces in Europe. Those social forces had their own differing programmes and policies, as demonstrated by the timorous manner in which, during the 1960s, the unions of Northern Europe faced issues associated with social harmonisation, out of fear of a deterioration in working conditions and of coming down to Italian levels.

In addition neither the Christian unions, the Communist organisations, the CGIL nor the

⁽³⁾ ETUS was created in 1958 by the ICFTU. It came into being as a result of the demand by European trade unions of an anti-communist persuasion to coordinate their reciprocal initiatives in dealings with the Community institutions and to win back terrain for union initiatives. It was later renamed the European Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ECFTU) and was joined by the Scandinavian and British trade unions. In 1974, with the affiliation of the Christian trade unions and the Italian Communist union, CGIL, it became the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC).

⁽⁴⁾ The meeting between Sicco Mansholt and the unionists is cited in Guasconi, 1998/1999, p. 249.

⁽⁵⁾ For an analysis of the historiographic debate that developed on the splitting up of the international organisation, WFTU, see Antonioli et al., 1999; Carew, 1987; Carew et al., 2000; Macshane, 1992.

⁽⁶⁾ On the position of the CGIL towards European construction see Galante, 1988; Maggiorani, 1998.



CGT were members of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), the organisation created in 1949 following the split of the anti-Communist union movements from the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU or FSM) ⁽⁵⁾. The Communist organisations had developed a very critical attitude towards European integration, which was regarded - in line with cold war thinking - as a tool of American imperialism. Only in the course of 1960s did they start to redirect their approach, setting up a standing committee in Brussels in 1966 ⁽⁶⁾. In addition to this, the most powerful European trade union, the TUC in Britain, had been firmly sceptical of European integration, reflecting the position adopted by the British Government right from the creation of the ECSC (Delaney, 2002).

Besides these many different voices in the unions, another factor was the relative lack of interest shown by employers towards closer cooperation with the unions, as demonstrated by the fact that up to 1967 the Union of Industrial and Employer's Confederations of Europe (UNICE) refused to meet representatives of the workers formally, preferring more direct and informal channels through which it could conduct its lobbying (Segreto, 2000).

Up to the 1970s, the limited results achieved in the European environment and the difficulties encountered in arriving at a common stance on Community policy led the European unions to use more traditional means, such as their own national channels, to press their claims and exercise their role. Although the European unions wished to be represented in Brussels, the role they performed was more symbolic and representative than real: their priorities were national initiatives, and they regarded the harmonisation of living and working conditions as an impediment to social progress (Pasture, 2001; p. 97). Despite these views, this first experience of unionism in Europe was not altogether negative, both because unionists came up against situations other than their national experience, something which constituted a process of 'European' training, and because this allowed them contact with influential European politicians such as Jean Monnet, who hoped to see many unionists taking part in his Action Committee.

The relaunching of social policy at the end of the 1960s

The Hague Summit of 1969, in particular the 1970 Werner Plan for the creation of the economic and monetary union, represented a turning point for the interests of the social partners and the progress of social policy in Europe ⁽⁷⁾.

In the course of the conference that marked Europe's passage from the 'six' to the 'nine', with the entry of Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom into the EEC, a conference that sanctioned the first attempt to bring about an economic and monetary union, German Chancellor Willy Brandt stressed - albeit in summary terms - the need for social groups to be more actively involved in European integration. At several points the Werner Plan highlighted the need to introduce a dialogue with the social partners as a prerequisite for the effective creation of monetary union ⁽⁸⁾.

The year 1971 saw the first reform of the European Social Fund, and in the following year the Heads of State and Government, meeting at the Paris Summit, solemnly affirmed that they regarded vigorous action in the social field as being as important as European economic and monetary union (Archives Nationales, 1972). They asked the Commission to draw up a social action programme, to be launched in 1974, focusing on three main objectives: full and better employment, an improvement in living and working conditions and greater worker participation in the Community's economic and social decisions.

What were the reasons for the renewed interest among the institutions and European Governments in promoting the dialogue with the social forces and in the development of a European social policy?

(a) the protest movements of May 1968 that spread to many European nations had highlighted the gradual emergence of new demands and new forces of society;

(b) the growing economic crisis that, especially with the oil embargo and price rises following on from the Yom Kippur war of 1973, was to affect every European nation, bringing to an end the period of great economic and production growth in the post-war period and in the 1960s. This brought

⁽⁷⁾ On the Hague Summit see Bitsch, 2001; Guasconi, 2003.

⁽⁸⁾ On the Werner Plan see: Girault and Poidevin, 2002; Frank, 1995; Bossuat, 1995; Ludlow, 1982; Verdun, 2001; Werner, 1991; Wilkens, 1999.



home the problems associated with unemployment, persuading the European Governments of the need for renewed dialogue with the social partners, above all the unions, which seemed to be playing a far stronger role (as exemplified by the 'hot autumn' of 1969 in Italy);

(c) the forthcoming enlargement of the Community to the countries applying for membership, which raised the problem of how to harmonise profoundly differing social policies in countries which, like United Kingdom, were living through a dramatic industrial decline; it led to a realisation of the need for a European social dimension, side by side with the more specifically economic dimension of integration;

(d) the role played by European partners such as Italy in promoting a Community-wide social policy, not just based on the free movement of workers, as an instrument for solving the problem of depressed areas such as the south of Italy;

(e) lastly, the greater international strength of the unions, exemplified by the creation in 1973 of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), whose membership included the Scandinavian unions, the British trade union movement, the Christian unions and, after prolonged internal struggles and due to the support of the Italian Confederation of Workers' Trade Unions (CISL) and the Unione Italiana del Lavoro (UIL), the CGIL from Italy. The birth of the ETUC was a true turning point for union representation vis-à-vis the Community institutions, as it marked an end to the divisions that featured so prominently in the history of the union movement after the Second World War. The unions now acquired the role of a social interlocutor in the eyes of the European institutions. Although in the early years of its life the unions saw the ETUC as a coordinating body and a Brussels lobbying channel, in 1974 the Confederation had a membership of 17 unions and represented some 36 million workers. It was evident, then, that 'given the historical legacy of splits and rivalry within the labour movement, the establishment of a regional trade union association including unions from all western European countries, most ideological directions and different global internationals, was a significant achievement' (Dølvik, 1999, p. 74).

The first Tripartite Conference on employment in 1970 and the problem of vocational training

The dramatic prospect of an economic recession and a crisis in the European labour market led the European institutions to devote new attention to social issues and the issues raised by employment.

In April 1970 the first Tripartite Conference on employment was held in Luxembourg, attended by representatives of the unions and employers, the Commission and the Ministers for Labour of the Six. In the memorandum that the unions submitted to the attention of the Council of Ministers on 25 March 1970, the organisations stressed the need to develop a European employment policy, whose objective would be to promote the creation of jobs in regions where there was surplus manpower and encourage movements of manpower from these regions to more productive and expanding sectors, to help match the supply of and demand for jobs, as well as to improve training and vocational training guidance for young people (European Council of Ministers, 30567-b). The report explicitly called for the creation of a standing committee on employment, linked with the reform of the Social Fund ⁽⁹⁾ and made up of representatives of governments, the Commission and the social partners. The aims of this committee, which would have the right of initiative, would be more efficient organisation of the labour market, provision of good vocational training services and better use of existing administrative instruments such as the Social Fund and the European Investment Bank, in part through more effective coordination among the committees working in vocational training and the freedom of movement for workers (European Council of Ministers, 30567-a).

During the Conference the debate focused on the need for a change in the Community's approach to and policy on the employment problem. The policy based solely on free movement for workers had been unsatisfactory, creating regional imbalances, as shown in the case of the south of Italy ⁽¹⁰⁾. The problem of vocational training was also tackled and debated at length: vocational training was defined as a 'permanent process' (European Council of Ministers, 30565) and a necessary way of bringing about economic growth and improving the prospects

⁽⁹⁾ The unions had first asked for a standing committee on employment to be set up in their memorandum on the reform of the European Social Fund (IISH, 1969).

⁽¹⁰⁾ On the debate during the Conference on employment, see Guasconi, 2003.



of workers. In particular the French union, Force Ouvrière, tabled a plan which was accepted as a basis for the debate (IISH, 1970). The Council of Ministers, in a note drafted after the Conference, stressed the growing importance of vocational training, now seen as an instrument that would help develop an effective policy on employment and provide a key to solving many economic and social problems (European Council of Ministers, 30541).

While the Council asked the Commission to study the problem of vocational training, the Standing Committee on Employment was set up in December 1970 and became one of the first centres of the European social dialogue, the body through which the social partners tried to influence the Community decision-making process. Right from its first meeting, held in Brussels on 18 March 1971, the German union DGB highlighted the importance of vocational training being one of the Committee's priorities and proposed the creation of a European institute for coordination, research and the production of technical and teaching method studies in the fields of vocational training and employment (IISH, 1971a). The European Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ECFTU), the predecessor of the ETUC, was to take up this proposal, presenting it formally during the second meeting of the Committee held in Brussels on 27 May. As the ETUC wrote in its report on the meeting: 'Our delegation stressed the need to go beyond the stage of choosing doctrines and principles and on to the implementation of concrete actions. The creation of a European Institute for the scientific study of vocational training, with the objective of more intensive reciprocal information on actual experience and the methods and programmes used, was called for' (IISH, 1971b).

The union demands were not accepted at the time, partly because they were offset by the lack of interest displayed by the union organisations in the Committee, as evidenced by the fact that no ECFTU leader, either its Secretary-General or its President, took part in the first two meetings. This attitude imprinted a very negative image of the ability of European trade union forces to take an adequate part in the promotion of Community social policy, conveying the impression that, in spite of their Europeanism, the unions preferred national to Community initiatives, something that obviously detracted from the

credibility of the union movement in the eyes of the Council of Ministers and the governments. A similar pattern of behaviour could be linked both with the refusal of the Council of Ministers to recognise the binding power of decisions taken by the Committee (Degimbe, 1999; p. 119) and to the greater importance attached by the European unions to the Tripartite Conferences, in which the Ministers for the Economy and Finance also took part (Barnouin, 1986, p. 89).

The European unions and the creation of Cedefop

The Paris Summit of October 1972 was another turning point in the development of a European social policy. For the first time the Heads of State and Government stressed the need to promote 'vigorous action in the social field', calling on the Commission, with the help of the other Community institutions and the social partners, to outline a social action programme whose objectives would include establishing a common vocational training policy with a view to the step-by-step achievement of its objectives and in particular the harmonisation of vocational training standards, especially by creating a European vocational training centre (IISH, 1974a), something regarded as of the utmost importance. It was clear from this programme that social policy was no longer regarded as a side issue of economic integration but had become a goal in its own right - one however that was not free from risks and ambiguities, as it was very difficult to draw a clear line between this social policy and the economic sector.

This call from the Heads of State and Government was shaped by an explicit request from the European unions which, in June 1972, presented a memorandum for the Summit calling on 'the Community governments and institutions to give practical support to the creation of a European labour institute aimed to train and prepare union leaders for their task of representing workers in terms of the European dimension'. On the subject of vocational training it stated that 'permanent training is not just a generous idea but a fundamental requirement of our times' (IISH, 1972).

Despite this new call for action, the Council and Commission were to regard many aspects of this programme, such as the cre-



ation of a European vocational training centre, with great caution. The Communist unions bitterly criticised this attitude, as demonstrated by a letter sent by the Committee of the CGIL-CGT in Brussels to the President of the ESC, Victor Feather, in June 1973. 'The governmental side,' the unions wrote, 'has expressed reservations on the more significant points of the draft Action Programme submitted for debate, relating to measures on employment, working conditions, vocational training, emigration ... All that it took was to create an incident in order to avoid the debate, and this is what was done with the Council of Ministers' refusal to take account of certain views expressed by the more representative trade unions' (IISH, 1973b).

For its part, the ECFTU reacted to this stonewalling by putting forward numerous proposals, including a social conference in May 1973, to provide a new forum for debate with the Commission and Governments; its main objective was to implement genuine consultation with the social partners who would jointly set the priorities for the programme promoted by the Council of Ministers (IISH, 1973a). This was an occasion to propose once again the creation of a European institute for vocational training with the task of acting as a channel of information, promoting the harmonisation of European training and carrying out pilot programmes aimed at reducing the imbalance between the demand for employment and its supply.

The decision to set up Cedefop did not make it any easier for the European Governments to discuss such important factors as the membership of the management bodies of the new institution, its budget, its functions and the participation of the social partners. In July 1974, during a heated debate at a meeting of the Council of Ministers social group, the UK delegation expressed strong reservations about the creation of Cedefop, while the German delegation bitterly criticised the composition of the Management Board, pointing out that, based on the proposals put forward by the Commission, the social partners, with two thirds of the votes at their disposal, would be able to impose their decisions on the other members (IISH, 1974a). Despite the Commission's attempts to defend its proposals, the German delegation exerted pressure on the other partners to change the composition of the Management Board, thus giving the Governments a majority vote. The

Board was then to consist of nine representatives of the Governments, three of the Commission, six of the unions and six of the employers. There was also disagreement as to the procedures for nominating representatives of the social partners, with the French, Irish and Dutch governments being opposed to union nominations, preferring candidates to be nominated nationally (IISH, 1974b). The unions, for their part, attached great importance to controlling the appointment of the Director, on whom in their opinion the future effectiveness of the Centre would depend (IISH, 1974b).

On 10 February 1975 the Council of Ministers announced the creation of a European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), whose seat would be Berlin. Three months later, on 26 May, the Foundation for Working and Living Conditions was established in Dublin.

The first few years of Cedefop's life were not easy. Most of 1976 was devoted to recruiting staff and drawing up internal regulations. It was not until the end of the year, in December, that Cedefop organised its first study seminar on the problems of youth unemployment in Zandvoort. Staff members complained of their terms of recruitment, which they saw as less advantageous than those of Community staff. The first Director, Karl Jörgensen, decided to resign. In spite of these initial difficulties, the unions proved to be particularly cooperative in promoting the Centre's activities. One example was the appointment of the new Director, Roger Faist, the former Secretary General of the Confédération Française des Travailleurs (CFDT) whose name was put forward by the ETUC following a unanimous vote. This was the outcome of an informal agreement reached with UNICE, the employers' union: UNICE was to control the appointment of the Director of the Dublin Foundation, allowing the trade unions to exert their influence over Cedefop's activities (IISH, 1975).

Conclusions

During a meeting of the union representatives of Cedefop and the Dublin Foundation in Düsseldorf in June 1978, Maria Weber, the German DGB unionist and, as ETUC member, active promoter of Cedefop, who served as its chairperson in 1979, stressed the commitment of the European unions towards



promoting a Community social dialogue, both generally and in vocational training. 'What I would like to say,' declared Maria Weber, 'without any emphasis is that it is the workers' representatives who secured the creation of these three bodies, by means of a protracted campaign at the level of the Commission's advisory committees, the Economic and Social Committee and negotiations by the European Trade Union Confederation, three bodies that are of great importance for the workers of Europe ... These institutions were necessary, because it became increasingly apparent that the administration of the European Communities was unable to perform the necessary tasks as effectively and as successfully as was wished in the various social domains; this of course was due to its structure and organisation but also to the fact that staffing in social affairs had been progressively eroded, despite the merging of Euratom-ECSC and the EEC and the enlargement of EEC to nine Member States.' (IISH, 1978).

Even though the social policy results achieved in the 1970s still seemed to be in the embryonic stage, for a number of reasons these first few steps should not be underestimated. First of all, social policy was an integral part of the European agenda, even though it was at that time specially identified with the issues raised by unemployment. Secondly, these results were to be the starting point for the broader programme promoted by Jacques Delors in the 1980s, which was to make social policy one of the Community's main goals. The creation of Cedefop and the issues of European vocational training were to become key issues for the unions in promoting dialogue with Community institutions and broadening the debate on aspects of European integration such as employment, the right to work, social security, working conditions and freedom of movement for workers, which up to that time had been the exclusive domain of national governments.

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