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THE EUROPEAN TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION – MORE THAN THE SUM OF ITS PARTS?

DOI: 10.18030/SOCIO.HU.2019EN.9

ABSTRACT

The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) represents some 45 million trade union members from eighty-nine national trade union confederations and ten European Industry Federations from thirty-nine countries. In 2019, ETUC entered its forty-sixth year and marked its fourteenth quadrennial Congress in Vienna where delegates intervened to shape the work plan and direction of the organisation for the coming four years and to elect a new Executive Committee.

This article takes stock of ETUC's background and primary activities and considers whether ETUC enhances the power and influence of its members, despite the challenging environment in which trade unions in Europe reside in the 21st century. In so doing, the article assesses the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing the organisation, which remains the largest civil society organisation in Europe.

Keywords: trade unions, industrial relations, social dialogue, social movements, European Union

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PART I: INTRODUCTION

Trade unions in Europe face a range of well-documented cross-cutting challenges. This includes the decline of traditionally highly-unionised blue-collar industries, the related almost universal collapse in union membership, and the electoral vicissitudes of traditionally allied social democratic political parties (see Degryse–Tilly 2013).

The great recession since 2008, and the EU’s austerity agenda and new economic governance regime which followed, has placed downward pressure on wages, pensions, redundancy entitlements, and on the volume and location of collective bargaining throughout Europe (Schömann et al. 2012). This period has also seen major increases in rates of atypical, precarious and ‘gig’ work, soaring youth unemployment, and rising levels of inequality. Meanwhile the very nature of work has changed drastically, given the structural changes associated with the rise of automation, micro-processing and other technologies – dubbed the ‘4th industrial revolution’ (Frey–Osborne 2017).

Taken together, this has precipitated the essential destruction of the employment relationship that had become standard in Europe since the 1950s, and the traditional, standard, stable forms of employment which trade unions had long fought for (Prosser 2019). This has taken the ground from under the feet of European trade unions, and undermines their ability to organise workers and to mobilise influence over public policy. Meanwhile, the many challenges in the EU’s political economy, including the Eurozone and sovereign debt crises particularly in the European periphery, the rise in support for right-wing populist politics, and the UK’s protracted withdrawal from the EU, has all piled further pressure on the EU’s social dimension (Dolvik–Martin 2015).

ETUC aims to exert influence over the EU’s institutional infrastructure and socio-legal context, the importance of which can only increase as so many of the challenges that unions now face originate at the transnational or global levels.

Barnouin (1986: 8–10) contends that the role of trade unions in Europe has never been limited to national borders, as the basic trade union ideology of international solidarity has led them to also undertake activities in international and transnational contexts. In Europe in particular, having experienced victimisation by fascist regimes in Greece, Italy, Spain and elsewhere, some unions have been traditionally positively disposed towards European cooperation, which was also seen as a way of off-setting the expansion of Communist subversion from the East.

ETUC was formed in 1973, against the background of a tumultuous phase of contemporary economic history, with oil shocks, stagflation, and the 1968 Paris May events all contributing to a heady cocktail of labour

market unrest and economic crisis. The birth of ETUC can arguably be described as an expression of union solidarity, but also as a form of caution, with ETUC's creation being seen as a way of effectively 'reigning in' disorderly national labour market activity.

Ladmiral (2003: 26) describes ETUC as the world's most significant regional trade union organisation. At its founding congress in Brussels in February 1973, ETUC represented 36 million members, 17 confederations from 16 European countries and six pan-European industry federations (EIFs).² Over the decades ETUC membership has swelled to include every major trade union confederation in Europe, including those with Christian and Communist legacies, which were initially excluded.

Since the 1950s, trade union attitudes vis-à-vis European integration has waxed and waned. ETUC's acquiescence to the European project is historically underpinned by the spirit of the Treaty of Rome, the preamble of which states *that 'the essential purpose of the states forming the new Community was that of constantly improving the living and working conditions of their peoples'*. This is perhaps best reflected in directives and legislation on working time, parental leave, and information and consultation rights at work, and more recently in the highly aspirational European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) unveiled in Gothenburg in 2017. The labour movement has played a central role in shaping the EU's social face, in large part through the auspices of ETUC.

However, in the years between the 1957 Treaty of Rome and the 1970s, many trade unions (including in France, Italy and the United Kingdom) were distrustful towards what was often seen as a predominantly capitalist, market-enhancing project which posed a serious threat to hard-won trade union and workers' rights. Importantly an inter-generational change occurred at this time, from those who entered the labour market in the interwar period and were agreeably surprised by post-war income and employment growth, to those who had only known tight labour markets with rising incomes. The European macro-economy from the mid 1960s onwards displayed stagflation that further compromised unions' public acceptance, and it is against this background that ETUC emerged.

Throughout the 1990s, following the introduction of the Social Chapter within the Maastricht Treaty, which sought to safeguard social and employment rights, trade union resistance to European integration dissipated, and in 1998, the French CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail), traditionally linked to the by then moribund Communist Party, became the last major European trade union confederation to join ETUC.

However, over the past decade, as EU member states and institutions have been complicit in the destruction of the EU's social fabric, particularly through EU-backed austerity packages for the likes of Greece, Ireland and Portugal, questions have been raised regarding ETUC's orientation towards the European project, and the purpose and status of unions within the EU.

Today, ETUC is accredited as one of the European social partners and is recognised by the EU, the Council of Europe, and the European Free Trade Area (EFTA) as the only representative cross-sectoral trade union organisation in Europe. ETUC sits alongside the employers' organisation BusinessEurope and the European Centre of Employers and Enterprises providing Public Services (CEEP), and are consulted by the European Com-

² EIFs are organisations of trade unions that operate at the sectoral level.

mission under Article 154 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) for the purposes of social dialogue at EU-level, as we shall see.

Critics view ETUC as an overly-bureaucratised, EU-financed appendage to the EU institutions, that acts largely as a conveyor belt for the policies and priorities of the European Commission. As such, detractors might argue that the organisation fails to realise its full potential as a counterpoise to multinational capital and to the power of the EU institutions (see Horn 2012, Hilary 2014, Upchurch et al. 2016). Here, ETUC is seen as mostly irrelevant to its member unions at the national and sectoral levels. This paper challenges this contention by presenting ETUC's core functions and activities, ranging from highly technocratic activities deep inside the EU machinery to more radical activities in the glare of publicity, and questions whether these deliver effective results for members and workers.

Following this short introduction, the next section sets out the methods used for this study and the sample of core activities that are the focus of the subsequent section. Part III reviews these core activities, namely ETUC's involvement in European Social Dialogue (ESD) activities, in the promotion of European Works Councils (EWCs), and in the mobilisation of workers through demonstrations and social movement unionism. Part IV considers what the future may hold for ETUC and identifies some of its major weaknesses and strengths. The final part concludes with a summary of the paper's main arguments.

PART II: METHODS

Research for this paper involved a review of primary literature pertaining to ETUC and the Europeanisation of industrial relations. This includes relevant Articles of the European treaties, European Directives and speeches, press-releases, working papers and websites maintained by the European Commission, the European Industrial Relations Observatory (EIRO), the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), and the European social partners.

The study is also informed by a set of interviews with European industrial relations experts which took place between 2011 and 2019. Interviews were open-ended in the sense of allowing, within a prepared framework, each question-and-answer exchange to lead on to the next, thus allowing interviews to express what they saw as the organisation's main strengths and weaknesses, and the opportunities and challenges facing the organisation.

ETUC is involved in a wide range of activities including highly technocratic undertakings set deep within the EU's institutional machinery, as well as more radical, and perhaps traditional, forms of worker participation, mobilisation, and resistance. Three of ETUC's activities which receive particular attention during fieldwork and in the literature, are: ETUC's involvement in ESD activities; ETUC's promotion and facilitation of EWCs, and the organisation's role in the mobilisation of workers through Europe-wide euro-demonstrations. With the exception of ETUC's mobilisation activities, these activities have been widely covered in secondary literature. A brief analysis of each follows.

PART III: ETUC CORE ACTIVITIES

European Social Dialogue

The prevailing mechanism for managing the employment relationship throughout Western Europe since the 1950s has been the form of political exchange termed ‘corporatism’ (Heywood 1997: 257). One of the most conspicuous varieties of corporatism is ‘economic tripartism’ which involves discussion and bargaining between business, labour, and state interest-groups to contribute to the setting of public policy (Slomp 2000: 81). Such exchanges are often known as ‘social partnership’ or ‘social dialogue’.

Under Articles 151–155 (TFEU), the European Commission is obliged to consult ETUC, along with the other social partners on *‘the possible direction of [European] Union action’* in the social policy field (Article 153, TFEU). Article 151 TFEU states that the Commission is responsible for *‘developing the dialogue between management and labour at European level which could, if the two sides consider it desirable, lead to relations based on agreement’*. ESD can take place at the cross-sectoral or sectoral levels.

Following the passage of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, a new article (Article 152) was added to TFEU stating: *‘The Union recognises and promotes the role of the social partners at its level, taking into account the diversity of the national systems. It shall facilitate dialogue between the social partners, respecting their autonomy...’*. This article extends the need for recognition and promotion of ESD from being purely the responsibility of the Commission, as stipulated in ex Article 138 Treaty Establishing the European Community (TEC), to ‘the Union’, including all of the EU’s institutions (Clauwaert 2011: 173).

These are the origins of tripartite exchanges that take place at EU level. Such exchanges encompass the discussions, negotiations and joint actions taken by European social partners across the ambit of employment and social affairs. More specifically, ESD involves three discrete activities: firstly, formal exchanges between the social partners and EU institutions, secondly, the direct consultation of the social partners by the European institutions regarding matters of social and employment policy, and thirdly the bipartite negotiations of the social partners through the social partners’ ESD committees, which can stem either directly from official consultations with the Commission, or through agreements and negotiations conducted autonomously by the social partners.

Following successful negotiations, ESD framework agreements can either be formalised into binding EU legislation as Council directives, which relate to all employers and employees in the economy or in a given sector, and not just to those affiliated to the social partners’ member organisations, or implemented ‘autonomously’ by the social partners themselves (Article 155, TFEU).

It should be noted that while ESD resembles the social partnership mechanisms existing in many European countries in form, the range of topics dealt with by ESD are greatly circumscribed relative to national equivalents. ESD deals largely with minimal social harmonisation on issues such as discrimination, equality, and health and safety measures, and does not cover matters for example concerning pay or pension entitlements.

In quantitative terms the results of ESD are impressive. According to the Commission, ESD has resulted in the adoption of some 300 joint texts, agreements declarations, statements, opinions, or reports (Commission

2019). These texts are variously joint positions, framework agreements, recommendations, declarations, tools, and rules of procedure (Degryse 2015).

Clauwaert divides the history of ESD into two phases: a period of ‘Commission- guided ESD’, with heavy involvement by the Commission (1992–1999), and a second phase marked by increased autonomous action by the social partners (1999–2010).

During the first phase, successful negotiations were concluded on three significant framework agreements incorporated as directives on: parental-leave (1996), part-time work (1997) and fixed-term work (1999) (Clauwaert 2011: 171).

The first agreement on parental leave had a wide impact. With the exception of the Nordic countries, the concept of parental-leave was previously barely known, let alone regulated, in most of Europe (Clauwaert–Harger 2000). The second and third agreements, the directives on part-time work and fixed-term work, had less of an impact, as most of the then EU–15, with a few exceptions (notably the United Kingdom and Ireland), already had detailed regulatory frameworks in these areas. However, following enlargement since 2004, the directives had a significant impact in the newer Member States, almost all of which lacked a comprehensive regulatory framework in these areas (Clauwaert 2011: 172).

During the second phase four so-called ‘autonomous framework agreements’ were reached by the social partners on: tele-work³ (2002), work-related stress (2004), harassment and violence at work (2007) and ‘inclusive labour markets’ (2010), to be implemented autonomously by the member organisations of the social partners (Clauwaert 2011: 171).

Further, in accordance with Articles 154–155 of TFEU, the social partners have been formally consulted by the Commission some 30 times since 1992 on a wide variety of issues, including climate-change, intellectual-property, and data-protection, where they were requested to prepare positions on behalf of their memberships in relation to Commission proposals (Clauwaert 2011: 172).

The period since 2010 has seen much more limited progress in ESD at both the cross-sectoral and sectoral levels than the previous phases. Notably, it has also seen more antagonistic relations between the social partners and the Commission, especially at the cross-sectoral level. This is largely a reflection of two things. Firstly, the practical reality that many of the obvious areas of employment and social policy had been attended to, such as regarding working time, parental leave and information rights. Secondly, it reflects the more hostile environment in which ESD now resides, and the austerity agenda that lay at the heart of the EU’s responses to the economic and social crisis since 2008. Overall, ETUC has adopted a more assertive position towards EU policies over the past decade. For example, in 2012 the organisation opposed the Fiscal Compact Treaty, the first time ETUC had explicitly resisted an EU treaty.

At the same time, on a number of occasions, negotiations between the social partners ended in failure, partly through ETUC resistance. This is not an entirely new occurrence. As far back as 2001 the social partners

³ Tele-work is defined as a form of organising and/or performing work, using information technology, where work, which could be performed at the employers’ premises, is carried out away from those premises on a regular basis.

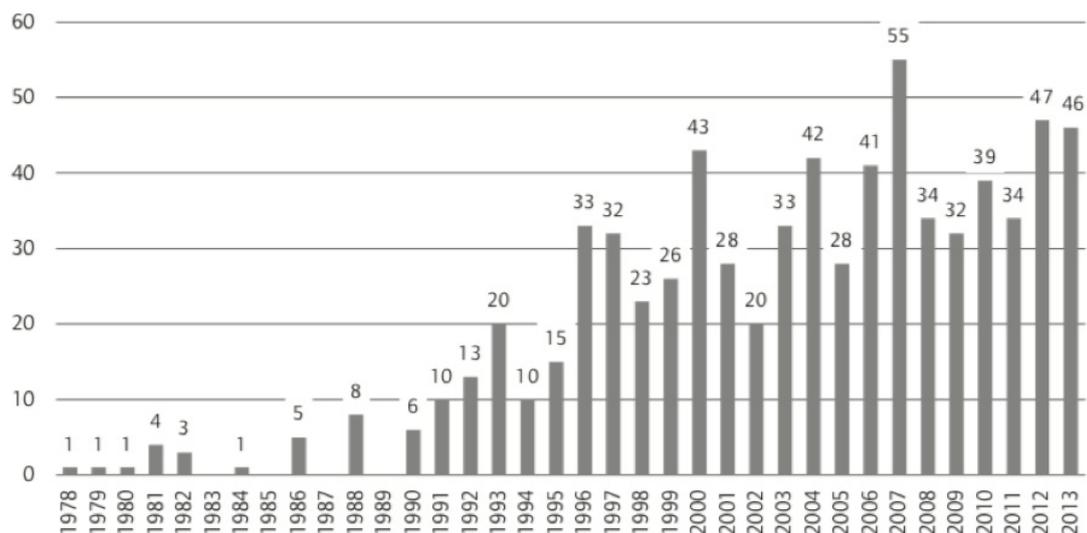
were unable to conclude a framework agreement on temporary agency work. In 2002, the Commission proposed a directive based on the consensus that had emerged among the social partners and in 2008 the redraft directive⁴ was adopted.

A protracted dispute over the revision of the Working Time Directive has lingered for more than a decade which has absorbed much of the energy from ESD in the process. In this case, in 2004, following the breakdown of negotiations, the Commission proposed a revised directive.⁵ Following this, in 2009, the European Parliament, the Commission and the Council failed to reach an agreement on the directive. In 2012, negotiations between the European social partners also broke down, largely around the treatment of ‘on-call’ working time. In 2013, the Commission resumed the review process, and in 2015 undertook a public consultation. The Commission Work Programme for 2017 included a non-legislative initiative on the implementation of the Working Time Directive, and at the time of writing the matter remains unresolved (Commission 2017). Time will tell how the new Commission under President Ursula von der Leyen will approach these thorny issues.

This recent phase of ESD, and the assertiveness shown by ETUC within the process, sees the European social partners relating to each other in a fashion that resembles the dynamics of social partnership at the national level more and more, while still falling short of collective bargaining in the traditional sense. This may be seen as part of a maturation process of ESD, and a step closer towards ‘multi-level governance’ in industrial relations (Marginson–Sisson 2005).

Notably however, Degryse (2015) notes that at the sectoral level, while the annual volume of ESD agreements has fluctuated since 2008 following a fall from the previous year, the overall trend is one of growth, and the number of dialogue agreements at the sectoral level continues to increase (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Progression in the number of SSD (Social Sectoral Dialogue) texts adopted (1978–2013)



Source: Degryse (2015)

4 See Directive 2008/104/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 November 2008 on temporary agency work.

5 See Directive 2003/88/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 4 November 2003, concerning certain aspects of the organisation of working time.

Involvement at the highest levels of EU decision-making in such a formal way as ESD inevitably entails a degree of 'technocratisation' (Goetschy 2005: 420) or *'élite embrace'* as the leadership engages with a process which can be seen as *'operating through unknown mechanisms behind closed doors'* (Hyman 2005: 18). While the involvement of the social partners in ESD was originally intended in part to counteract the EU's democratic deficit (Buda 1998: 23), it may in fact exacerbate ETUC's own internal democratic deficit, distancing the leadership further from the rank-and-file membership.

Views on ESD and the unions' role within it are divided. A Commission representative emphasised the significant role ETUC plays through ESD, saying *'ETUC really has a big influence when it comes to employment and social policy, and the commission's role is really limited; it's totally unique for a stakeholder group'*. However, a senior national-level trade union representative stated bluntly that *'in ESD the trade union bargaining position is not strong...we are very critical of the current art of ESD...In the absence of hard collective bargaining, making lots of non-binding agreements, reviews and studies isn't a good substitute'*. In a somewhat pessimistic vein, an ETUC official surmises that *'ESD is potentially more important on paper than it is in reality...the truth is, it's very difficult to do it, and even harder to do well. It has had limited achievements, but achievements nonetheless'*.

ESD is only *one* of ETUC's habitats, and despite the shortcomings outlined above, when looked upon in terms of what the process has achieved through policy-development, framework agreements, and access to decision-making, it seems clear that ETUC's role in ESD enhances the power and influence of its members.

Promotion of information and consultation rights- European Works Councils

A second example of a core ETUC activity is the organisation's promotion of EWCs, and the coordinating role it takes in their activities. ETUC are ideologically committed to the provision of information and consultation rights to workers, and the *'development, improvement and enhancement of education and training and the democratisation of the economy'* (ETUC Constitution, preamble, see ETUC, 2019a), and regards EWCs as playing an important role in achieving these aims.

EWCs are institutions which are broadly modelled on works-councils that exist in many European countries under different names ('Comités d'Entreprises' in France, 'Betriebsrat' in Germany, and 'Joint Consultative Committees' in the United Kingdom). Works-councils are representative bodies for workers, functioning as a firm-level complement to national labour negotiations.

Where established, EWCs give worker-representatives in multi-national corporations (MNCs) the obligation to be consulted by management regarding significant planned or anticipated changes within the company. EWCs include at least one worker-representative from each branch of an MNC, ensuring workers in different countries are given the same information about company policy and plans (Eurofound 2010).

EWCs are significant in terms of European industrial relations as they represent the first institutionalisation of interest-representation at enterprise-level in Europe (see Commission, 1989). ETUC's support for EWCs, is shown by a significant commitment of staff and resources to their promotion and coordination, including as regards training and the sharing of best practices, and by ETUC's sustained campaign *'on the offensive for*

stronger EWCs' (ETUC, 2010). According to one ETUI researcher, who works centrally on EWCs: *'When we have informal working meetings with all people involved with EWCs, we have a team of 12 to 15 participants from throughout ETUI, ETUC, and the EIFs⁶'*. EWCs are clearly a major priority for ETUC, and are described as *'key to worker representation and participation'* by an ETUC official.

ETUC's support for EWCs is underpinned by its research and training activities, largely through the auspices of the allied European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), the independent research and training centre of ETUC. ETUI describes itself as *'the independent research and training centre of ETUC'* contending that *'ETUI places its expertise – acquired in particular in the context of its links with universities, academic and expert networks – in the service of workers' interests at European level and of the strengthening of the social dimension of the European Union'*. ETUI also encourages *'training and learning activities'* by providing *'ETUC and its affiliates with programmes and exchanges that strengthen the European trade union identity'* (ETUI 2019).

ETUI thus aims to provide trade unions with *'the tools to participate in the European debate, and to contribute actively to achieving social Europe'* (Monks et al. 2011: 1). In practice, ETUI acts as ETUC's in-house think-tank and training-centre, and is described by one ETUI insider, as an *'independent entity beneath the umbrella of ETUC'*. ETUI is financially supported by EU. in exchange for which, according to a senior Commission official, *'the Commission relies on ETUI as a reliable source of accurate information and data'*. A central aspect of ETUI activity is its promotion and support for EWCs.

The first EWC directive was adopted in 1994⁷ and a revised directive was adopted in 2009⁸. Notably the number of established EWCs has grown steadily since their introduction, even throughout the crisis years (see figure 2). After more than twenty years, some 1529 EWCs have been created, of which 1150 still exist (EWCDDB, 2019). The highest concentration of EWCs exists in the tradeable sectors, including in the metal and chemical industries, while they are less common in the likes of public services, transportation and construction (see Figure 3; see De Spiegelaere 2017). Currently, about one-third of eligible companies have EWCs (EWCDDB, 2019). According to ETUC, the companies that do not set up EWCs tend to be smaller, often with a low level of union organisation, and where managements are often hostile to involving workers in decision-making. This proportion could be seen as relatively low, but ETUI see it as a work in progress, and believe that a strong trade union presence is the best way to establish and sustain successful EWCs (ETUC 2019b).

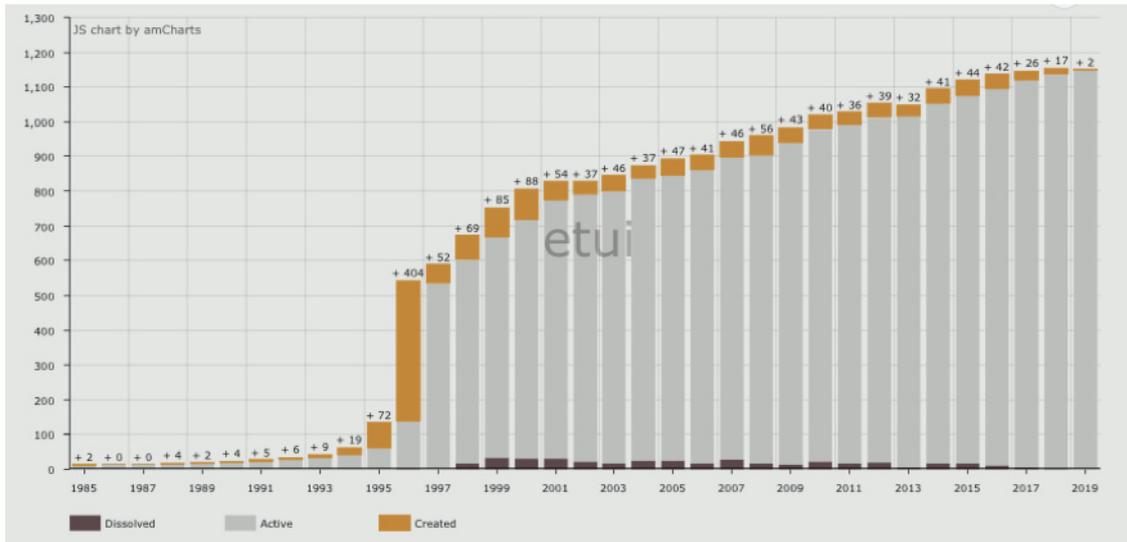
Worker representatives on EWCs do not need to be trade union members, and often are not, and the introduction of voluntary workplace partnership arrangements such as works councils is often seen as a tactic by management to avoid trade union involvement in decision-making. Involvement in such entities is also often criticised by more radical trade union elements as amounting to a submission to management prerogative (Munro–Rainbird 2000: 224). It may seem strange, therefore, for ETUC to be proactively involved in encouraging the development of EWCs, and in promoting trade union involvement therein. So, why does ETUC promote EWCs?

6 EIFs, as above, are organisations of trade unions that operate at the sectoral level, and are constituent members of ETUC. EIFs play a key coordinating role in the formulation and maintenance of EWCs.

7 Directive 1994/45/EC on the establishment of a European Works Council.

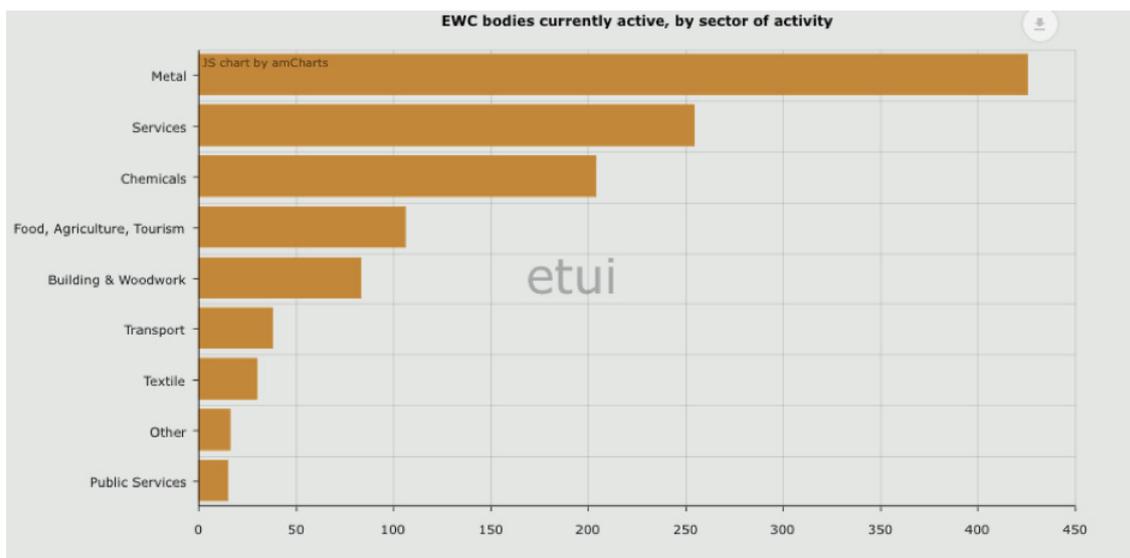
8 Directive 2009/38/EC on the establishment of a European Works Council.

Figure 2. Growth of EWCs (1985–2013)



Source: ETUI’s European Works Councils Database (see EWADB 2019b).

Figure 3. EWCs by activity in 2019



Source: ETUI’s European Works Councils Database, (see EWADB 2019c).

ETUC’s support for EWCs can be put down to at least three related factors. Firstly, ETUC are ideologically committed to principles of democracy that are firmly in the social democratic centre, as stated in the preamble to the ETUC constitution (ETUC, 2019a) and to the provision of information and consultation rights for workers (ETUC, 2019b). EWCs are seen as a way of ‘democratising’ the workplace, by involving employees in, or by at least providing them with rights to be consulted about, decisions which directly affect them (ETUC, 2019b). ETUC can be seen as contributing to the democratisation of global governance through the promotion of EWCs (Erne 2011: 12).

Secondly, EWCs can be seen as an opportunity for workers to exert ‘quasi-control’ over a constituency (i.e. multi-national capital) which has long had the power to outflank and undermine national labour codes and

unions (Martinez-Lucio–Weston 1998: 553). Gaining influence in this way at European company level can help trade unions and employees to shape industrial developments, and is key example of the Europeanisation of industrial relations (Marginson 2000).

According to an ETUI researcher, apart from doing what they were designed to do, EWCs have also seen ‘*some organic and spontaneous developments*’. The range of issues considered within EWCs can often go beyond core issues of employment and company performance, to cover non-wage labour costs and topics such as health and safety, equal opportunities, training, mobility, corporate social responsibility and environmental issues (Commission 2004).

Thirdly and relatedly, EWCs can provide opportunities for workers from different countries and regions to ‘socialise’, and form relationships. According to a senior ETUC source, ‘*With EWCs, information and consultation rights are important, but more importantly, EWCs develop relationships, and help to build solidarity*’. EWCs give worker-representatives in different production-locations the opportunity to consult with each other and to develop common responses to employers’ transnational plans. EWCs thus can help sow the seeds of collective identity that can provide unions with the links necessary to organise cross-border collective action, which has so often eluded them (Erne 2008). EWC structures and meetings can make it easier for workers to organise their actions, to understand the tactics of management, to identify common interests, and to form relationships (see Gajewka 2008, Weinert 2005).

Thus, EWCs embody many of ETUC’s central aims, and provide ways for organised labour to address the relative inaccessibility and disproportionate power of MNCs, through the cross-border socialisation of workers. EWCs may also present one of the best prospects for enhanced European-level collective bargaining that is otherwise constrained by legal frameworks and national procedures. Taken together, this can explain why ETUC are committed to their success.

Euro-demonstrations and decentralised days of action – ETUC and social movement unionism

As well as the above-mentioned technocratic activities, ETUC also conducts more traditional forms of direct action by coordinating and supporting the mobilisation of workers.

ETUC does not have the power to call strikes, and industrial action remains a matter for national trade unions, undertaken in line with their own procedures and national laws. ETUC does organise ‘euro-demonstrations’ and decentralised ‘days of action’ to campaign on issues of importance for its members. Euro-demonstrations are sometimes directed at specific decision-making events, such as European Parliament meetings and Council summits, in a bid to influence the EU agenda. Other euro-demonstrations are called under vaguer slogans such as ‘*no to austerity*’, and ‘*fight the crisis, put the people first*’ (ETUC 2019c). These activities involve ETUC interacting directly with rank-and-file union members (Turner 1996).

The ETUC website lists 28 such actions as having taken place since 1993 – 19 euro-demonstrations, focused in particular places, and 9 decentralised days of action, where activities take place in different national capitals and locations on the same date or dates. Euro-demonstrations have taken place under various

banners, such as: in Rome in 2003 calling for *'social Europe'*, in Ljubljana in 2008 calling for *'more-pay, more purchasing-power, more equality'*, and in Wroclaw under the banner of *'Yes to European Solidarity – Yes to jobs and Workers' rights – No to Austerity'* (ETUC 2019c). These events require significant resources, and participation is far from uniform (Dufresne 2015).

One campaign that achieved tangible results was that against the Draft Directive on Public Services ('Bolkestein Directive') in 2006, which involved both decentralised action and a euro-demonstration (Upchurch et al, 2016). Similar events occurred around ETUC's campaign in favour of the incorporation of the Charter of Fundamental Rights (the Charter) into the EU *acquis* (2000–2009).

Crucially, such initiatives bring ETUC into contact with other civil society organisations, and allows the space for broader coalitions to form where shared interests can be identified and articulated. Social Movement Unionism (SMU) is a trend in contemporary trade unionism that calls for trade union integration into broader coalitions to campaign collectively on social and economic justice issues (Upchurch et al. 2016). SMU typically involves collective action campaigns in contrast to strikes, building coalitions with community organisations, and campaigning on broadly political, rather than narrowly labour market issues (Gajewska 2008: 106). This involves unions wielding what Allan Flanders (1961) called the 'sword of justice' by defending a broader set of interests in society, rather than the narrower sectional interests that they are often associated with.

The largest euro-demonstration to-date was in Berlin in 2009 and according to ETUC attracted some 150,000 participants (ETUC 2019c). Up to a point, these campaigns highlight two parts of ETUC's strategy, namely: closer collaboration with NGOs to develop a common agenda around a shared vision of Europe's social face, and secondly, the attempt to actively mobilise trade unionists around key social issues. Notably however, the most recent decentralised event took place in 2013, with two decentralised days and one euro-demonstration in Brussels in 2012. Thus, during the deepest years of crisis (2012–2015) ETUC coordinated no such actions.

It is also notable that commentary on these events is relatively sparse. This lack of material is surprising, given that trade unionists and non-trade unionists alike view these events as among ETUC's core activities. Given the colourful advertising campaigns in the lead-up, and the huge mobilisation of effort and resources that such events require, this dearth of information about the events after the fact may be deemed an ETUC communication failure.

However, in combination with its role in the likes of ESD and in the promotion of EWCs, these activities show ETUC as capable of combining its role as a social partner with the more campaigning approach associated with SMU. While euro-demonstrations and SMU activities may represent one of the most conspicuous forms of action ETUC can sanction, in many instances it is difficult to pin down what these events in fact achieve, or aim to achieve. A number can show some tangible results as discussed, whereas with others (such as the campaigns against 'austerity'), it is difficult to ascertain what success would even look like. At the same time, it is clear that these events are regarded as highly significant by ETUC and its affiliates.

One ETUC representative suggests that the most important thing about these events is that *'they bring people together, and provide the clearest sense of building a European Trade Union movement'*. The trade

unionist continues that *'euro-demonstrations are a way to exert influence on decision-making...the European Parliament is directly elected, [and] if they see people exercised about something, they tend to take note'*. Notably also, ideological differences have long divided unions, stunting development and cooperation. As euro-demonstrations bring together unions from across the political spectrum in Europe (and within countries), this may help bridge these differences.

An employer representative was also definite that the ability to mobilise thousands of workers is *'very impressive, and employers are jealous of ETUC's capacity to do this. Strikes, work-stoppages, mobilisations are all disruptive, and hit employers where it hurts, and quite simply, noise carries'*. Regardless of what ETUC and their members feel about collective-action, eliciting this reaction from a business representative is noteworthy.

The organisation of euro-demonstrations and direct action may be seen as constituting an important complement to ETUC's *'élite networking'* and more technocratic activities outlined above, by providing opportunities for rank-and-file union members to be directly involved in ETUC activities, which are often regarded as remote from the 'shop-floor'. It is because of this that the lack of any such demonstrations since 2013 may be surprising. Notably however, ETUC is firmly in the democratic centre and is committed to a social contract that underpins the EU's social market economy. This puts it at odds with some of its more radical affiliates, including the likes of Unite in the UK, or FO (Force Ouvrière) in France who are more sceptical and cautious about European integration. Indeed, ETUC's limited involvement in and support for euro-demonstrations and other forms of direct action over the past decade can in part be viewed as a way of limiting the input from its more radical affiliates such as these, which would traditionally have been heavily involved in euro-demonstrations. As the new Parliamentary legislature and Commission cabinet takes shape, it will be interesting to see if ETUC moves to assert itself once again in this fashion.

The foregoing discussion of some of ETUC's core activities provides only a limited view of its doings. But the selection may illustrate the range and breadth of tools and resources that the organisation has at its disposal, ranging from the narrowly technocratic to the more radical. Beyond these, ETUC is involved in such activities as: policy analysis, documentary publication and reviews, education and training, interacting with international institutions and, in particular, lobbying EU institutions. The following section will zoom in on ETUC's stated goals for the years ahead.

PART IV ETUC IN THE FUTURE

Clearly, ETUC has adopted a more assertive position towards EU policies in recent years. As above, in 2012 the organisation opposed the Fiscal Compact Treaty, the first time ETUC had resisted an EU treaty and at the same time, negotiations between the social partners broke down on a number of cases. At the same time, ETUC has focused almost entirely on its more prosaic, technocratic activities including ESD and the promotion of EWCs, while placing less emphasis on euro-demonstrations and direct action.

Outgoing Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, the son of a trade union official, sought to kick-start the EU's social agenda in 2015. The Commission initiated a *'New start for social dialogue'* and a statement was signed by the EU social partners and the Commission which culminated in the signing of EPSR in Gothen-

burg in 2017 (Eurofound 2018). While the spirit and content of EPSR receives wholesale support from trade union quarters, it is entirely aspirational, and has, as yet, amounted to nothing substantive.

Regarding the future of ESD, and in order to live up to the spirit and aims of EPSR, ETUC, the social partners and the Commission could take meaningful steps to ensure the effective implementation of framework agreements through a legally enforceable arrangement which would ensure the binding nature of agreements, and with powers of arbitration and conciliation vested in an independent EU body (Lapeyre 2015). Currently implementation throughout the bloc is far from uniform, and dialogue could help to challenge any race to the bottom in labour standards (Bercusson, 2009). A renewed emphasis on ESD could also help to address some of the wider inequalities that exist between member states, and could help manage the massive structural shifts that are forthcoming, including towards the 'green economy' and the digitalisation agenda, and to feed-in to any future reforms to Eurozone governance.

In a similar fashion, ETUC's involvement in the promotion and maintenance of EWCs, and a renewed focus on the promotion of pan-European trade union solidarity through the coordination of euro-demonstrations and decentralised days of action, could be vital in ensuring the interests of working people are at the heart of the EU's policy agenda.

ETUC articulates its goals and priorities through regular statements and position papers on topics including digitalisation (ETUC 2019d), company law (ETUC 2019e), and regarding the UK's protracted withdrawal from the EU (ETUC 2019f). ETUC's 2019–2021 Work-Programme for European social dialogue identifies six key priorities, namely: digitalisation, labour markets and social systems, skills, risks at work, social dialogue, and the circular economy (ETUC 2019g). Annually the organisation's clearest statement of intent comes from ETUC's position papers relating to its formal consultations with the EU Commission regarding the European Semester, which highlight similar themes (Eurofound 2019).

Arguably however, the clearest statement from ETUC regarding its values and priorities can be gleaned from the output at its quadrennial Congress, including its manifesto for 2019–2023, dubbed the 'Vienna manifesto' after the city where the latest Congress was held (see ETUC 2019i). The manifesto is built around a preamble and thirteen principles and initiatives, declaring that the European trade union movement will build 'a fairer Europe for Workers'. Ultimately this document sets out the organisation's goals, priorities and its understanding of its own place in the world.

The manifesto identifies ETUC's many issues of concern for working people and for the future of Europe, including: *the effects of unregulated globalisation, climate change, digitalisation and automation, growing inequalities and the rise of far-right forces*. The manifesto calls for the establishment of the long sought Social Progress Protocol, a call for investment in quality job creation and public investment in public services, public goods, social protection, training and in the promotion of social justice and gender equality. ETUC specifically calls for the implementation of the principles of the EPSR and for the reinforcement of social dialogue at all levels.

Through these positions, ETUC reveals several of its core beliefs and values, including its commitment to a partnership approach and to progressive reform. It sees its role as negotiating with the European and na-

tional institutions and employers' organisations as the best way to improve the working and living conditions of its members and to shape the future world of work. It also clearly sees itself as the representative of a wider cohort than purely union members and workers, by calling for social reforms that go far beyond the workplace and beyond the limits of union membership.

CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this article has been to assess whether ETUC enhances the power and influence of its members in light of declining trade union influence, the '*increasingly hostile terrain of social Europe*' and the '*fragmented, multiple identities*' of its membership (Taylor–Mathers 2004: 270).

Looking ahead, for any understanding of ETUC's role and influence, it is crucial to factor in and review some of the many factors that undermine ETUC's capacity and effectiveness. Firstly, ETUC is weakened by the diversity of its membership. The '*variable geometry*' and heterogeneous orientations of its affiliates' backgrounds, structures, and legal standing can make it difficult to reach consensus and form coherent agendas (Hyman, 2005). Secondly, while ETUC is positioned as a 'social partner' at EU-level, the organisation has extremely limited direct influence over macroeconomic policy. This renders ETUC incapable of having direct input into the legislation and policies that are arguably of most relevance to workers.

Thirdly, while ETUC finances its activities through fees paid by affiliates, it also obtains substantial financial support from the EU. Some commentators argue that this lack of financial independence undermines ETUC's autonomy (Upchurch et al. 2016). Fourthly, ETUC's membership is reluctant to cede hard-won powers to the EU level (Martinez-Lucio–Weston 1998). Thus, ETUC is kept 'on a short leash', a fate shared by many national confederations vis-à-vis their own affiliates. Fifthly, and relatedly, European trade unions remain almost exclusively national in outlook and remain preoccupied with activities within their national spheres (Buda 1998: 35–36).

Finally, enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe has created huge variation in wages across Europe, which heightens the potential for social dumping and a continent-wide 'race to the bottom' in labour standards which tests union solidarity.

Despite these challenges though, ETUC is still the most highly-developed regional trade union organisation in the world, and arguably benefits from its status within the EU treaties and institutional framework, and delivers tangible results for members. By examining some of the core activities undertaken by ETUC, this paper challenges the narrative that regards ETUC as less than the sum of its parts, by arguing that its ability to mobilise both highly technical and specialised resources in response to EU policy change and austerity, alongside the more traditional structural and associational forms of power resources of its members, overcomes its weaknesses, and makes the organisation uniquely effective in representing the interests of workers at EU-level.

ETUC's activities, for better or worse, puts it into contact with the highest EU decision-making echelons through the processes of ESD and ETUC's formal and informal interactions with the EU institutions. The impact of some ESD agreements has been considerable, particularly in newer EU member states. This includes the

provision of paid breaks and annual leave for all workers⁹ which, according to ETUC *'would have been considered revolutionary 40 years ago'*, and the provision of legislation for parental leave, which was a radical departure especially in the likes of the UK and Ireland.

Meanwhile ETUC's promotion and facilitation of EWCs provides workers in MNCs with substantive consultation rights, and with the potential to influence the strategic decisions of MNCs. Crucially as well, EWCs are central to ETUC's aim of building and promoting democracy in the workplace, and for more equitable corporate governance.

Finally, ETUC's capacity to mobilise thousands of workers for the admittedly rare euro-demonstrations and its SMU activities has fostered solidarity between workers, and can be seen to have directly influenced the agendas of the EU institutions, by engaging rank-and-file union members directly in its activities. By involving workers in the drive for a shared vision of Europe's social agenda, this can serve to recruit new members to unions and to invigorate existing ones, and even to tackle the much-maligned democratic deficit in Europe.

ETUC has united trade unions from across Europe for decades, to promote workers' interests, and to challenge the EU institutions, national governments, policy-makers and employers, and especially, the growing influence of MNCs. It is argued here that ETUC succeeds in enhancing the voice and power of its member organisations through its broad range of activities. Looked at in a vacuum, the achievements of ETUC in its first forty-six years can be considered substantive. Looked at in the context in which it operates, its successes, particularly those of recent years, may be regarded as impressive.

⁹ See Article 1, Working Time Directive 2003/88/EC

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