

# Trade Unions and “Europe”: Are the Members Out of Step? Les syndicats et l’Europe : les membres sont-ils déphasés ? Los sindicatos y la Europa: ¿los miembros están desfasados?

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## Article abstract

In 2005 the “Constitutional Treaty” designed to restructure the governance of the European Union (EU) was rejected in popular referendums in France and the Netherlands. Subsequently only in Ireland was a referendum held on the Lisbon Treaty, which reinstated most elements in the previous version, in June 2008. Again a negative result threw the EU into crisis, though a second Irish vote in October 2009 yielded a different result.

The “no” votes reflected a familiar pattern of popular rejection of initiatives on European integration. This article provides an overview of such referendums in western Europe, focusing in particular on the role of national trade unions in popular votes on EU accession and on Treaty revisions. It discusses trade union intervention in a dozen countries which held referendums since the Single European Act in the 1980s (and in the United Kingdom, which did not).

It is evident that while mainstream trade unions (or at least their leaders) have usually endorsed the integration process, in most countries where referendums have been held their members have voted otherwise. This has been particularly evident among manual workers. Sometimes popular attitudes have been strongly influenced by narrowly nationalistic arguments, but rejection has often been based on “progressive” rather than “reactionary” grounds. In particular, the justified view that the EU in its current direction is encouraging a neoliberal, pro-capitalist drift in social and economic policy has underlain a left-wing critique of further integration.

But having assented to the underlying architecture of actually existing Europeanization, unions have rarely shown the will to mobilize offensively around an alternative vision of social Europe. This has left the field open to right-wing nationalists (and to fringe left-wing parties with only a limited electoral base) to campaign in the “no” camp during referendums. Popular attitudes are malleable, but it requires a major strategic re-orientation if unions are to reconnect with their members in order to build a popular movement for a genuinely social Europe.

# Trade Unions and “Europe”: Are the Members Out of Step?

Richard Hyman

The “no” vote in the Irish referendum of June 2008 on the Lisbon Treaty—reversed in October 2009—threw the European Union into crisis. Yet it reflected a familiar pattern of popular rejection of initiatives on European integration. This article provides an overview of such referendums in western Europe. It is evident that while mainstream trade unions (or at least their leaders) have usually endorsed the integration process, in most countries where referendums have been held their members have voted otherwise. Such rejection has often been based on “progressive” rather than “reactionary” grounds. Popular attitudes are malleable, but it requires a major strategic re-orientation if unions are to reconnect with their members in order to build a popular movement for a genuinely social Europe.

**KEYWORDS:** European Union, referendums, trade unions, Lisbon Treaty, neoliberalism, social Europe

## Introduction

I was at a trade union seminar in Germany in June 2008 when news came through of the Irish “no” to the Lisbon “Reform” Treaty. Reactions combined incredulity and exasperation: incredulity that voters who had benefited economically from European Union (EU)<sup>1</sup> membership should reject the next stage in the integration process, exasperation that a country with under 1% of total EU population could block ratification of a Treaty which would incorporate the unions’ cherished *Charter of Fundamental Rights*.

But were the Irish voters the surrogate voice of popular opinion in Europe more generally? Writing a few years earlier, Kaufmann (2003) argued that the use of referendums had become the norm for accession decisions: they were used by all countries intending to join the EU in 1994 (and with the exception of Cyprus all new entrants in 2004) and were increasingly common for Treaty revisions. In almost all cases, the use of the referendum was optional and constitutionally only advisory (though in practice a negative popular vote could not readily be disregarded). Only in Ireland (following a Supreme Court judgment in 1987 that significant changes to national sovereignty must be approved by popular vote), and in Denmark in the absence of a five-sixths parliamentary majority, was a referendum constitutionally required. Elsewhere, governments tended to resort to referendums for tactical or strategic reasons: to win public legitimacy for a potentially contentious decision; to neutralize dissent within their own parties; to exploit divisions within the opposition

(a reason for Mitterrand's Maastricht referendum); or to strengthen their hand in bargaining accession terms or safeguards in Treaty revisions (Christin and Hug, 2002; Closa, 2007). And once the precedent was established, governments would find it hard to avoid future referendums on EU issues: the process would become "politically obligatory" (Morel, 2007).

Such expectations were dashed by the French and Dutch "no" votes on the Constitutional Treaty (or Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe, TCE) in 2005. Six of the seven other scheduled national votes were abandoned. Neither Bulgaria nor Romania held referendums before accession in 2007; and the Irish citizens alone were to vote on the Lisbon Reform Treaty, some 90% of which overlapped with the TCE. EU referendums were no longer "politically obligatory" but had become politically dangerous.

This article has three main sections. First, I give a brief overview of the literature on the referendum experience in Europe and on the problematic concept of "euroscepticism." Second, I consider in more detail most of the key recent referendums, and trade union involvement in particular. Partly because of the limits of my own linguistic capacities, I focus on western Europe. Third, in conclusion and again briefly, I address the paradox that mainstream unions in Europe have long been among the most reliable supporters of EU integration, whereas their constituents have been among the most sceptical or hostile. What might a progressive trade union position towards European integration look like?

## Referendums on European Integration

Since the Single European Act (SEA) of 1986—the first revision of the 1957 Treaty of Rome—there have been some 40 national referendums on issues related to EU accession, association or Treaty revision.<sup>2</sup> As Table 1 indicates, there have been many cases when the popular vote has gone against integration proposals. Most notably, the Norwegian electorate (with an exceptionally high turnout) rejected accession in 1994, as it had done previously in 1972. The Swiss referendum on membership of the European Economic Area (EEA) in 1992, widely seen as a precursor to EU membership, resulted in a hair's-breadth "no" vote. In consequence Liechtenstein, economically tied to Switzerland, had to renegotiate the terms of its own EEA membership and hold a second referendum. Thereafter Switzerland has negotiated bilateral agreements with the EU/EEA, approved in the four referendums to which they have been submitted (though a referendum proposal for EU accession in 2001, not supported by the main political parties, was heavily defeated).

Switzerland is an exceptional case, and unfortunately I do not have space to discuss this in any detail.<sup>3</sup> A referendum can be initiated on any legislative issue by the signatures of (according to context) 50,000 or 100,000 citizens, and roughly ten are normally held each year; this provides trade unions, which can mobilize both signatures and voting, with an important political resource. They played a key role in the referendum of September 2005 on free movement of labour from the new member states. Both main confederations (SGB/USS and *Travail.Suisse*) demanded

**TABLE 1**  
**European Union Referendums since the Single European Act (SEA)**

Country	Issue	Date	Yes %	Turnout %
Denmark	SEA	26.02.86	56	75
Ireland	SEA	26.05.87	70	44
Denmark	Maastricht	02.06.92	49	83
Ireland	Maastricht	18.06.92	69	57
France	Maastricht	20.09.92	51	70
Switzerland	EEA	06.12.92	49.7	78
Liechtenstein	EEA	13.12.92	56	87
Denmark	Maastricht	18.05.93	57	87
Austria	Accession	12.06.94	67	82
Finland	Accession	16.10.94	57	71
Sweden	Accession	13.11.94	52	83
Åland *	Accession	20.11.94	74	49
Norway	Accession	28.11.94	48	89
Liechtenstein	EEA/CH	09.04.95	56	82
Switzerland	Accession	08.06.97	26	35
Ireland	Amsterdam	22.05.98	62	56
Denmark	Amsterdam	28.05.98	55	76
Switzerland	Bilateral agreement	21.05.00	67	48
Denmark	EMU	28.09.00	47	88
Switzerland	Accession	04.03.01	23	55
Ireland	Nice	07.06.01	46	35
Ireland	Nice	19.10.02	63	49
Malta	Accession	08.03.03	54	91
Slovenia	Accession	23.03.03	90	60
Hungary	Accession	12.04.03	84	46
Lithuania	Accession	10-11.05.03	90	63
Slovakia	Accession	16-17.05.03	92	52
Poland	Accession	7-8.06.03	78	59
Czech Republic	Accession	13-14.06.03	77	55
Estonia	Accession	14.09.03	67	64
Sweden	EMU	14.09.03	44	81
Latvia	Accession	20.09.03	67	73
Spain	Constitution	20.02.05	77	42
France	Constitution	29.05.05	45	70
Netherlands	Constitution	01.06.05	38	62
Switzerland	Schengen	05.06.05	55	57
Luxembourg	Constitution	10.07.05	57	88
Switzerland	Free movement	25.09.05	56	55
Switzerland	Aid to NMSs	26.11.06	53	45
Ireland	Lisbon	12.06.08	47	53
Switzerland	Free movement	08.02.09	60	51
Ireland	Lisbon	02.10.09	67	59

\* The Åland Islands are a semi-autonomous Swedish-speaking province of Finland. Having supported accession only narrowly (52%) in the general Finnish referendum in October 1994, its citizens voted separately in November following the Swedish referendum and endorsed accession by a large majority.

Source: various, including Kaufmann (2003) and national statistical reports. There is cross-national variation in whether blank and spoiled ballots are included in the turnout figure, and hence whether the "yes" percentage refers to all valid ballots or is reduced by the non-valid quotient. This rarely makes a difference of more than one percentage point.

legislative measures to protect wages against “social dumping” as the price for their support in the referendum, as they did again in February 2009 in relation to workers from Bulgaria and Romania.

All nine accession referendums in 2003 were successful, though in Malta—where the opposition Labour Party campaigned against—the margin was narrow (Cini, 2003). Referendums on Treaty revisions have proved more unpredictable in their outcomes. The Danes narrowly rejected the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, a vote reversed the following year after the Edinburgh Agreement offered concessions to Danish concerns; while Mitterrand’s opportunistic decision to hold a referendum in France almost backfired (Criddle, 1993). In 2001 the Irish rejected the Nice Treaty, a vote reversed the following year. Both the Danish (2000) and Swedish (2003) electorates have rejected the single currency. Thus the French and Dutch voters in 2005 followed a well-worn path, as did the Irish in 2008.

European integration has proved to be, in a phrase coined by Maor and Smith (1993), a “maverick issue.” For many observers, underlying EU-related referendums is a “second-order” agenda, based “on short-term, national, rather than on long-term, European, considerations” (Franklin *et al.*, 1994: 470). Voters, according to this argument, are less concerned with the European question actually posed in the referendum than with the performance of the national government. In particular, those who normally support the governing party (or parties) may vote “no” in the knowledge that this will not result in the victory of the opposition, as would happen in a normal national election.

“Second-order” effects are particularly likely to have applied in the case of recent Treaty revisions. The TCE was a 474-page document (in its English version) and was unlikely to have been read in its entirety by significant numbers of voters. In November 2004, one-third of EU citizens had not even heard of the TCE, and of those who had—and claimed broadly to understand its contents—many were misinformed (Eurobarometer, 2005a). The Lisbon Treaty was shorter (271 pages) but was widely seen as intentionally impenetrable, since much of its content involved amendments to the existing Treaties which could be interpreted only through detailed cross-referencing; in effect it was an even more complex version of the TCE.

The balance between “first-order” and “second-order” responses seems to vary both within and between countries. Not surprisingly, knowledge of the content of Treaty revisions correlates with education—though even those with the highest educational levels are frequently misinformed (Eurobarometer, 2005a; Hobolt, 2007). And the political salience of the EU varies cross-nationally: “whereas European integration is a highly politicized and debated issue in some countries, it remains a peripheral topic in others” (Hobolt, 2006a: 155).

Particularly where background knowledge is limited, referendum campaigns themselves may be of critical importance in structuring perceptions and in framing the questions at issue. The success of opposing organizations and parties in defining what are the key policy issues can determine the referendum outcome, but successful definition and redefinition strategies can prove volatile, one reason for

the considerable swings in public opinion during many of the campaigns (de Vreese, 2007; Marsh, 2007). And redefinition of the choices helps explain those occasions when the outcome shifts substantially between referendums on what is formally virtually the same question.

It is common to treat "no" votes in EU referendums as an expression of euroscepticism. This can be somewhat tautological: opposing accession, EMU entry or Treaty revision is both consequence, and an element in the definition, of euroscepticism. Quite apart from the linguistically questionable conflation of euroscepticism (literally, doubts about European integration or particular proposals to achieve it) and europhobia (hostility to the whole idea), this is also problematic in implying that there is a single dynamic underlying such opposition, regardless of time and place.

Much recent literature has been critical of such assumptions. "No coherent theory exists that details *what* euroscepticism is, or *why*, *when* and *how* it occurs and develops" (Sørensen, 2008: 6). According to George (2000: 15) one may identify a continuum "from having doubts about the form that integration is taking, to having doubts about the benefits and advisability of further European integration, to hostility to the whole enterprise." To some extent this connects with the distinction proposed by Lubbers and Scheepers between "political" and "instrumental" euroscepticism, the former involving opposition to ceding national sovereignty to European institutions, the latter based on a cost-benefit calculus of the outcomes of EU (or eurozone) membership. Likewise, Taggart (1998: 366) distinguishes between "contingent or qualified opposition" and "outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration."

Recently, Sørensen (2008: 8) has suggested a classification based on four broad types of euroscepticism. The first two, "economic" and "sovereignty-based," match the Lubbers and Scheepers schema. But to these she adds "democratic euroscepticism," based on a perception that EU decision-making is remote from popular accountability and control; and an objection to the specific political content of EU policies. In particular, this fourth type tends to focus on social policy, based on perceptions that the dominant approach within the EU involves either too much or too little "Social Europe" (the latter, she assumes, being currently the main basis of criticism). Contrasting three western member states, she suggests that euroscepticism in Denmark is sovereignty-based and to some extent democratic; in France, primarily social, but in part economic and democratic; in the UK, sovereignty-based and partly economic.

These distinctions are of major importance in making sense of the referendum outcomes, and the trade union role in the process, which are the subject of the remainder of this article.

## Trade Unions and European Referendums

In this central section I focus mainly on the referendums of 2005 and 2008, but against a longer historical background and wider geographical span. Organizing the material in roughly historical sequence, I start with an overview of the Nordic member states, and in particular the 1994 accession referendums—with a brief examination

of that in Austria—and the Danish and Swedish euro referendums. Then I consider the four TCE referendums in 2005 (in the French case, against the background of the previous referendum on Maastricht) and the Irish referendum on Lisbon (also against the background of several earlier referendums). I end by mentioning the British case, in particular the debates on the euro and the non-existent referendums on the TCE and Lisbon, with some reference to other “non-referendums.”

### **Denmark and Norway: From Accession Negotiations to Maastricht**

The Nordic countries have been described as “reluctant Europeans,” suspicious of the risks of EU membership in terms both of national economic interests and the viability of their distinctive social models (Miljan, 1977). In general the official trade union organizations have assessed the economic benefits of integration as outweighing the risks, but have not necessarily convinced their memberships. As Archer (2000: 105) has concluded in an overview of the Nordic region, “trade union leadership has been positive, but with some reservations, and has often found the membership hostile.”

Denmark joined the EU in 1973, and has held six referendums on EU-related issues, more than any other member state except Ireland. In addition the Danish territory of Greenland, having obtained home rule in 1979, voted (with a majority of 53%) in a referendum three years later to withdraw from the EU—the only secession to date. In the view of Franklin (2002: 752), the Danes “have by far the best developed views on European integration of any voters in the European Union.” This also means that, in contrast to many national trade union movements, European issues cannot be delegated to EU “experts”; as one union official told me, his area’s delegate conferences are usually quiet until the EU is mentioned, when 20 members will be on their feet wanting to speak.

The accession negotiations were concluded under a *Socialdemokraterne* minority government, which stressed the economic advantages of membership, and the LO leadership campaigned strongly in favour. However, two major unions (SiD and Metall) were opposed, and a special LO congress endorsed accession by a relatively narrow majority (524-406) (Haahr, 1993: 178). In the referendum there was significant opposition on the left, and though the result was a 63% “yes” vote, this primarily reflected solid support by right-wing voters (Archer, 2000; Svensson, 2002). Left-wing criticism persisted after accession, and the *Socialdemokraterne*, now in opposition, were divided over the SEA; the party leadership offered general support but the Parliamentary group decided to oppose. LO was again split, and agreed to adopt no formal position on the referendum (Haahr, 1993: 207-210); the SEA was eventually endorsed by a 56% vote, again based mainly on solid support from right-wing parties.

Denmark was one of three countries to hold a referendum on the Maastricht Treaty and the only one to vote against, despite a large majority in favour in the preceding parliamentary vote. The Treaty was endorsed by the leaders of the *Socialdemokraterne* and the LO, the latter citing in particular the “social chapter” as a reason for support. The opposition was led by the left-wing *Socialistisk Folkeparti* (SF, Socialist People’s

Party) together with two smaller right-wing parties. In the event, members of SF voted solidly against, as did almost two-thirds of Social Democratic supporters, hence the majority of trade union members, contributing to a "no" majority of just under 51%. In the political turmoil which followed, a "national compromise" was reached setting the terms on which the SF would end its opposition, and these in turn were accepted by other EU members in the Edinburgh Agreement. In the second referendum the Treaty was accepted, but the great majority of SF supporters, and almost half the Social Democrats, still voted "no," with manual workers and public sector employees most strongly opposed (Christiansen, 1992; Svensson, 1994 and 2002; Worre, 1995). At the next referendum, on the Amsterdam Treaty in 1998, much of the SF leadership moved back to the stance of their rank-and-file and joined the "no" campaign. However LO mounted a well resourced campaign in favour of the Treaty, on the theme of *Fagligt Europa* (a trade union Europe) (Petersen, 1997). This time the "yes" majority was comfortable, but somewhat smaller than in the second Maastricht vote; the split among social democrats matched the national result (Petersen, 1998).

In Norway, much of the background to the accession referendum was similar to that in Denmark, but the outcome was different—partly because of the country's larger geographical spread and the stronger relative weight of the more remote regions, which were strongly anti-EU. In advance of the 1972 referendum, the leaderships of both *Det Norske Arbeiderparti* (Labour Party, DNA) and the LO strongly supported EU membership. At a special LO congress in June 1972, this position was overwhelmingly endorsed, and the confederation "devot[ed] huge resources to a campaign in favour of... membership" (Dølvik and Stokland, 1992: 165). Yet there was "substantial grassroots EU opposition," contributing significantly to the 53.5% "no" vote. "The results of the referendum came as a substantial shock to the LO leadership. A clear majority of LO members chose to ignore the LO leadership and voted to oppose membership" (Geyer, 1997: 67-68).

The outcome "left the unions seriously split," and LO subsequently "follow[ed] a very cautious strategy" (Dølvik and Stokland, 1992: 165). When DNA in the mid-1980s revived the accession issue, the LO leadership refused to adopt a firm position; and when the EEA agreement was drafted, in effect as a half-way house to EU membership, it published a set of 15 conditions for its support. In June 1990 the leadership announced that these conditions had been satisfied, but "opinion of LO members continued to be skeptical" (Geyer, 1997: 68).

## Enlargement 1995

The previous divisions were well to the fore when the three main Nordic countries outside the EU, together with Austria, applied for membership. The four referendums were deliberately sequenced with the aim of creating a bandwagon effect, with the first votes held in the countries with strongest popular support. But though voting after the other three countries had approved accession, the Norwegian electorate again rejected membership, though by an even narrower majority on a higher turnout than in 1972.



On paper the issues were more restricted than before, since by entering the EEA—which was not subject to a referendum—Norway had adopted much of the EU *acquis*. But key problems related to fisheries and agriculture, again spurring a powerful interest-based opposition. The new application for membership had been initiated by a DNA government, and much of the LO leadership was sympathetic, but a special LO congress voted 156-149 against. The *Sosialistisk Venstreparti* (Socialist Left Party) campaigned strongly against membership, as did an organized anti-EU section of DNA (Sciarini and Listhaug, 1997). In the referendum itself, cross-cutting an urban/rural split, manual workers strongly supported the “no” side, and there was also higher opposition among women than men, partly because EU membership was seen as a threat to the Norwegian welfare state (Sogner and Archer, 1995; Wyller, 1996).

In Sweden the vote was similarly close, but in the other direction. Before the 1990s, EU membership had been generally ruled out as inconsistent both with Swedish neutrality and with its highly developed welfare state. But the end of the cold war and the escalating economic problems led to membership of the EEA in order to participate in the European single market (Archer, 2000). As in Norway, EU accession was then initiated by a social-democratic government, but with considerable internal opposition: a special congress of the *Socialdemokratiska Arbetareparti* (SAP) in June 1994 supported EU membership by 232-103 (Jahn *et al.*, 1998: 63). Leaders of LO—and also the white-collar confederation TCO—in general supported EU membership; but there were major internal divisions, and officially LO took a neutral position. In the referendum, “grass-roots union members, especially in the blue-collared sector, provided one of the main sources of opposition” (Archer, 2000: 104). SAP supporters split 50:50 between “yes” and “no” (Johansson and Raunio, 2001: 236).

Finland registered the highest pro-EU vote of the Nordic accession countries, in part reflecting a high degree of pro-EU consensus on the left. In contrast to Sweden, supporters of the *Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue* (social democrats) voted 3:1 in favour of accession, and those of the *Vihreä liitto* (Greens), which made no formal recommendation, did so by a small majority (while the Swedish Greens opposed accession), and the left-wing *Vasemmistoliitto* also took no formal position (unlike its anti-accession Swedish counterpart), though its members voted 3:1 against (Johansson and Raunio, 2001). This meant that support for EU membership was far less problematic for the Finnish trade unions than elsewhere in Scandinavia. A crucial background factor was that throughout the cold war, Finnish politics was dominated by the need for economic and political coexistence with the neighbouring Soviet Union. The collapse of the Soviet empire disrupted Finland’s trade with the east, creating an urgent need for stronger economic links with the west, and also made EU membership a protection against future conflicts with an unstable Russian neighbour (Arter, 1995). “Most trade unions had a positive attitude towards EU membership and may have contributed to the successful persuasion of the uncertain Social Democrats” (Suksi, 1996: 60).

Austria was the first of the 1995 accession countries to hold its referendum, and registered the largest majority (two-thirds). Many of the contentious issues that

emerged on the left in Scandinavia were also salient here, but partly because of stronger discipline in the party (SPÖ) and union (ÖGB) figured less prominently in the campaign. The "very marked and stable elite consensus on the desirability of EU membership" (Kaiser, 1995: 414) was however a late construction. The initial demand for accession came from the employers' side and was endorsed by the christian-democratic ÖVP. The SPÖ had long opposed EU membership as incompatible with Austrian neutrality; but attitudes changed in the mid-1980s, and in 1989 the party leadership endorsed accession with minimal internal opposition (Kaiser, 1995: 412).

Within the ÖGB, reservations were at first stronger. At a special conference in July 1988, nine conditions were set for accession, including guarantees for Austrian neutrality, the protection of Austria's welfare model, and guarantees that the unions' privileged role in national policy formulation would be extended to EU-level decision-making.<sup>4</sup> But the reservations were rapidly sidelined—in part, perhaps, because of the leading role of the ÖGB president, Fritz Verzetnitsch, within the ETUC (he was to become its president in 1993). In March 1989 the ÖGB signed a joint statement with the employers supporting accession, on condition that Austrian neutrality was preserved. The ÖGB congress in October 1991 was organized with a succession of outside speakers favouring accession, though the leadership emphasized "its fundamental position, that the goal of European integration must be the creation of a democratic and social Europe." Speakers from the floor were however far more critical: most of the 1988 preconditions had been forgotten, the demand to sustain neutrality and national control of social policy was just "a pious wish," union members in a number of sectors would be threatened by the single market. By the time of the referendum, the publicity material issued by the ÖGB was almost exclusively in favour of a "yes" vote. As a senior official told me, there was a systematic process of propaganda leading up to the referendum campaign. All the structures of the ÖGB were expected to be opinion leaders, and hundreds of events were organized across the country.

In the event, organized opposition was rather marginal. Among the political parties, the only significant opponents were *Die Grünen* and the far-right FPÖ, though for very different reasons (Pelinka and Greiderer, 1996). In marked contrast to the Scandinavian countries, almost three-quarters of SPÖ voters supported the party line, whereas the "no" vote among supporters of the two opposing parties proved less solid (Kaiser, 1995: 414).

### **The Euro: Denmark and Sweden**

EMU had not been a significant issue in the Austrian and Finnish referendums, and both countries were among the eleven member states to join the eurozone at the outset. In Sweden, as in Denmark—where EMU had been one of the contentious questions in the Maastricht referendum, resulting in effect in allowing an opt-out<sup>5</sup>—the question was to recur, in both cases ending with negative referendum votes.

In Denmark the governing *Socialdemokraterne* initiated a referendum in 2000, with the backing of most political parties, even though popular support for the single

currency was lower than in any member state apart from Britain (de Vreese and Semetko, 2004: 706). The top leadership of LO also gave strong support (Marcussen and Zølner, 2001: 387). As on previous occasions, the *Socialdemokraterne*—and the unions—were in practice divided; the members don't trust us on European issues, a senior LO official told me after the referendum, adding: "and they shouldn't." Again the *Socialistisk Folkeparti* was opposed (as was the smaller right-wing *Dansk Folkeparti*). The opposition was generally regarded as managing a more effective campaign than the "yes" camp, stressing the risk that Danish political autonomy would be submerged within the eurozone. The outcome was a somewhat larger "no" vote than anticipated, over 53%; as in previous referendums, a slight majority of social democrats voted "no" (Qvortrup, 2001).

In Sweden the SAP was also divided, though premier Göran Persson attempted to impose central discipline. The party agreed to support euro entry at a special conference in 2000, "albeit with a number of caveats"; two years later the national council decided that its conditions had been met (Widfeldt, 2004: 506). The LO in 2000 "adopted a cautiously positive position" (Widfeldt, 2004: 507), setting conditions for macroeconomic management which the government could not easily accept. In fact LO was divided: the manufacturing unions *Metall* and *Industrifacket* were strongly in favour of the euro, *Handels* and *Transport* were equally strongly opposed, with most other unions lukewarm; hence in April 2003 the LO decided not to take a formal line on the referendum (Aylott, 2005; Berg, 2003). Nevertheless its president Wanka Lundby-Wedin signalled her personal support, and signed a pro-euro declaration together with the heads of the two white-collar confederations and business leaders. "The splits within and between the SAP and the LO meant that the major labour movement organizations could not present a united front in the campaign. Another factor, which alienated many working-class voters and SAP supporters, was the co-operation with what were normally regarded as political 'enemies'" (Widfeldt, 2004: 509). In the event, the rejection of euro entry—by a margin of 12%—was far more decisive than anticipated. LO members voted almost two to one against, and TCO members were evenly divided. The majority of SAP supporters again voted "no."

### The Four Referendums on the Constitutional Treaty

Ten member states announced referendums on the TCE, with Sweden undecided at the time of the negative votes in France and the Netherlands. By then, Spain had already held its referendum, and Luxembourg decided to proceed despite the two rejections, but all other referendums were abandoned as the ratification of the TCE was put on hold.

The ETUC strongly supported the TCE, despite explicit qualifications. It had campaigned vigorously for the Charter of Fundamental Rights to be given legal status within the new Treaty. When it appeared that this might be dropped, it warned that "governments must be aware of the risk of a strong reaction building up among the working peoples of Europe if the Constitution is unsatisfactory on social questions.... This could put trade union support for the Constitutional Treaty in jeopardy, with

potential repercussions especially in countries planning to hold referendums" (press release 10 June 2004). When this threat was averted, the TCE was endorsed by overwhelming majorities in the Steering Committee on 13 July 2004 and the Executive Committee on 14 October 2004. Though arguing that "the Constitution must represent a base from which to promote the construction of more Social Europe," the ETUC concluded that "support is the only pragmatic and realistic approach for trade unions." But as a leading official later commented wryly, "not one affiliated organization raised objections or concerns with regard to the ETUC approach to the Convention or the IGC. Once the process was finished, major and fundamental criticisms were voiced" (Kowalsky, 2006: 449). In the event, only the French *Force ouvrière* (FO) voted against, while twelve affiliates including the British TUC, French *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT), Swedish *Tjänstemännens Centralorganisation* (TCO) and the *Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses* abstained.<sup>6</sup>

### Spain: No Contest?

The TCE was endorsed by all major Spanish parties, including the governing socialists (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español*, PSOE). The only significant national party opposed was *Izquierda Unida*, which primarily comprised the former communist party, but had attracted under 5% of the popular vote in the previous national election. Both main trade unions, *Unión General de Trabajadores* (UGT) and *Comisiones Obreras* (CC.OO.), campaigned for a "yes" vote—though a left-wing fraction, *sector crítico* CC.OO., opposed the official line.

The referendum endorsed the TCE by a massive 77% majority. However, turnout was only 42%, compared to a vote of over 70% normal in Spanish national elections (though in line with the turnout in the previous European elections). The result was widely interpreted as a sign of a lack of popular interest in, or comprehension of, the Constitutional Treaty. Nevertheless, in contrast to the three subsequent referendums, over 90% of PSOE supporters voting supported the TCE (Eurobarometer, 2005b).

### France: Maastricht and the Constitutional Treaty

In France, referendums are convened at the discretion of the president. The first-ever referendum on European integration was held in April 1972 in order to endorse the first wave of enlargement; this was supported by over two-thirds of French voters. Twenty years later, François Mitterrand called a referendum over Maastricht. Both presidential decisions were widely viewed as opportunistic: Georges Pompidou in 1972 "was seeking to assert his authority through an issue (European integration) assumed to have a unifying and mobilizing potential, whilst simultaneously exposing the divisions among his political opponents.... All these preoccupations were Mitterrand's in the spring of 1992" (Criddle, 1993: 228)—though the referendum could also be seen as asserting the viability of the Maastricht Treaty after the Danish rejection. On either count, the initiative backfired, with a bare majority of voters approving the Treaty.

The campaign saw most mainstream politicians in the yes "camp," though there were some rebels within the *Parti socialiste* (PS), and the main right-wing parties

were more fundamentally divided. Both the *Parti communiste* (PCF) and the far-right *Front national* (FN) campaigned against. Among the unions, the Treaty was actively supported by the CFDT and opposed by the CGT.

The referendum result provided a major basis for the “second-order” voting thesis (Franklin *et al.*, 1995). According to Moravcsik (1993: 52), “the rhetoric of opposition to (as well as support for) the Maastricht treaty had strikingly little to do with its specific provisions; on the contrary, like the decision to call a referendum itself, it reflected in large part the specific domestic political circumstances under which it took place.” Indeed, surveys indicated that 40% of “no” voters were motivated by discontent with Mitterrand and the government, 30% by rejection of the whole political class (Criddle, 1993: 238). But in practice, “domestic” and “European” concerns are not easily disentangled. Both the government, and its critics on the left, presented monetary discipline, institutional reform and curbs on public spending as necessary responses to the single market and the future single currency (Milner, 2000; Ross, 1998). Post-election analyses suggested that these considerations, rather than the xenophobia of the FN and some other opponents on the right, primarily contributed to the size of the “no” vote, which “was working-class, with industrial and inner-city areas voting heavily against, notably areas of high unemployment” (Criddle, 1993: 235). As Moss argued (1998: 70), “this was not a nationalist vote but a class vote of protest by those who associated sound money and the single currency with unemployment.”

In 2005 the line-up of forces was very similar, though on this occasion—and doubtless one reason why Jacques Chirac called the referendum—the PS (whose members had voted almost 4:1 in favour of Maastricht) was far more deeply divided. Its deputy leader and former prime minister, Laurent Fabius, came out against the TCE. An internal party ballot resulted in 59% support for a “yes,” but the minority was sufficient to sustain an organized oppositional role (Ivaldi, 2006: 51-52). *Les Verts* (Greens) also held an internal ballot, which resulted in a narrow “yes” majority, and both factions campaigned on opposite sides. Smaller left-wing parties were actively opposed to the TCE, while a leading role was taken by the *altermondialiste* group ATTAC (Cassen, 2005).

As in 1992, the trade unions were divided.<sup>7</sup> The CFDT was again a strong supporter, listing “ten good reasons to say yes,” and was joined by two smaller confederations. As noted above, the FO was the one ETUC affiliate to vote against the TCE at the executive meeting, and it insisted that it did not consider itself committed by the ETUC decision in favour, which it argued was procedurally incorrect. Its central objection was that the TCE entrenched a neoliberal policy regime destructive of employment rights and welfare provision. FO did not actually call on its members to vote “no,” since it was “confident of their astuteness and power of reasoning”—but the message was clear. The position of the CGT was particularly interesting. As noted above, it abstained in the ETUC vote, perhaps restrained by its recent (1999) acceptance into the Confederation and the election of its international secretary, Joël Decaillon, to the ETUC secretariat in 2003. Its initial assessment of the TCE (May 2004) was rather

neutral, echoing both the positive and negative comments of the ETUC. In September there was still no clear verdict, and the confederal committee set up a working group to prepare a position paper. But at the national committee in February 2005 there was in effect a rank-and-file revolt—which the general secretary, Bernard Thibault, deplored as the creation of a minority of activists—committing the CGT to campaign for rejection of the Treaty. The vote was in fact decisive: 81 to 18; the CGT returned to the position of opposition it had adopted in 1992. The most unambiguous trade union opposition came from the smaller left-wing *Union syndicale Solidaires* (SUD), which called for a vote against neoliberalism but for a different Europe.

The popular verdict was decisive, a 55% "no" vote on a high turnout. As in 1992 (and in negative outcomes in other countries), the "no" vote was firmly rooted in the working class, indicating "a clear-cut class cleavage opposing the haves and the have-nots in contemporary French society" (Ivaldi, 2006: 57). This included 56% of PS supporters, a dramatic change from 1992 (Ivaldi, 2006; Marthaler, 2005). Analysis of the campaign and the results identified two very different bases for rejection. Certainly one strong element in France was a xenophobic nationalism, exemplified by the FN. There was a perceived threat to jobs from enlargement in 2004 (on which none of the EU15 countries had held a referendum), exemplified by the "Polish plumber" issue, and there were also strong reactions against possible Turkish accession. But conversely, there was a left-wing, pro-European "non" (Brouard and Tiberj, 2006; Milner, 2006). As in 1992, the connection was made between deflation and deregulation at home and the policies being driven by the European Commission and symbolized by the Bolkestein services directive—against which the ETUC had organized a European demonstration on 21 March. This was "a vote against a particular Europe, an economically liberal Europe" (Brouard and Tiberj, 2006: 266), and was as much (or more) a "retrospective performance evaluation" (Ivaldi, 2006: 59) as an assessment of the actual content of the TCE.

### The Dutch Rejection

The Dutch referendum took place three days after the French and was even more decisive in its outcome, with a 62% "no" vote. This was the more remarkable because whereas "in France there was opposition to the Constitutional Treaty from within the heart of the party system..., in the Dutch case there was little opposition to the Treaty from the mainstream parties" (Taggart, 2006: 19). All three parties in the centre-right coalition supported the TCE, as did the opposition Labour Party (*Partij van de Arbeid*, PvdA) and the *GroenLinks*. As in France, the opposition was led by parties outside the political mainstream: on the left, by the *Socialistische Partij* (SP), and on the right, by a diverse array of nationalistic, religious and xenophobic parties and groups.

The main Dutch trade union, the *Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging* (FNV), urged its members to vote "yes": "the European Constitution is a step forward." But FNV does not appear to have engaged actively in the campaign.

Many of the key arguments in the campaign, on both left and right, mirrored those in France. But another theme was that the Netherlands, a small country, was losing its autonomy and cultural identity within an enlarged EU and was being sidelined

by the larger member states, that it was paying too much to Brussels, that the euro had hit consumers' pockets (Aarts and van der Kolk, 2006; Harmsen, 2005; Lubbers, 2008). Since this was the first Dutch referendum in modern times, the government had no experience of such campaigns, and the "no" campaigners appeared far more successful in taking the initiative and defining the agenda. The "no" vote was far greater than expected, probably influenced by the result in France. PvdA supporters voted in the same proportions as the national pattern, and supporters of both main government parties also recorded "no" majorities (Harmsen, 2005: 12).

### Luxembourg: Too Close for Comfort

Luxembourg was the one government to continue with its referendum after the dual rejections in France and the Netherlands, in part because it held the EU presidency in the first half of 2005 and wished to demonstrate that the TCE was not yet dead. Given the high degree of popular support for European integration—indeed the highest in any member state—a substantial majority was taken for granted; but though the result was positive, the "yes" vote of under 57% was "an embarrassment for the Juncker government" (Qvortrup, 2006: 93)—particularly since the outcome could be seen in part as a simple vote of confidence in a popular prime minister, who threatened to resign if the vote was lost.

Virtually all political parties—including the social-democratic *Lëtzebuenger Sozialistesche Arbechterpartei* (LSAP)—supported the TCE; of those represented in parliament, only the small right-wing *Alternativ Demokratesch Reformpartei* (ADR) took a neutral stance, though with an obvious negative inclination. The far left, not represented in parliament, attacked the TCE as entrenching a neo-liberal regime (Hausemer, 2005: 2), and an *altermondialiste* action committee played a substantial role in the opposition campaign (Dumont *et al.*, 2007: 22-24). Public knowledge of the TCE was shown in surveys to be extremely limited.

The two main trade union confederations, the socialist *Onofhängege Gewerkschaftsbond Lëtzebuerg* (OGB-L) and the christian-democratic *Lëtzebuenger Chrëschtliche Gewerkschaftsbond* (LCGB), both supported the TCE, though with significant differences in enthusiasm. The LCGB gave strong support, insisting that the Treaty involved no threat to social protections; the OGB-L was lukewarm. The resolution adopted by its national committee in March was headed: "yes, but..." and stressed that the balance between market liberalization and social rights fell short both of the demands of the ETUC and the content of the original draft Constitution presented by the European Convention. This gave a green light for those speaking on behalf of the union to emphasize the negative.

The dominant message of the "no" campaign was the threat to "social Europe," including the expectation of job security. As in many other countries, manual workers voted 2:1 against and supporters of the LSAP split evenly between "yes" and "no"; while 85% of "no" voters nevertheless considered membership of the EU "a good thing." The most frequently cited reason for voting "no" was the threat to jobs through offshoring (Dumont *et al.*, 2007: 122, 127-128, 187).



## **Ireland: The Route to Lisbon**

As in a number of other member states, the trade unions in Ireland have shifted from a primarily anti-EU stance to support for further integration—though ironically, this change has coincided with declining support for the EU in popular referendums.

Ireland joined the EU in 1973 together with Britain and Denmark, and is the only one of the trio to have entered the eurozone. The unions campaigned against accession, but the referendum in 1972 endorsed membership by a majority of 83%, and (unlike their British counterparts) they then engaged fully in the EU institutions. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) took no formal stance on the SEA, which was approved by 70%. On Maastricht, "from a directly opposed position in the 1972 referendum to a non-specific position on the SEA, the ICTU finally evaluated EC membership and the prospects of further commitments positively in the 1992 campaign" (van Wijnbergen, 1994: 186). Though some on the left opposed Maastricht as a threat to Irish neutrality, the debate was overshadowed by the abortion issue, with some on the left objecting to a restrictive protocol to the Treaty obtained by the Irish government while some anti-abortion groups objecting on diametrically opposite grounds. The outcome was a decisive 69% "yes" vote.

The vote on the Amsterdam Treaty took place the same day as that on the Northern Ireland agreement, a matter of some controversy. Notably, the rules of the game changed: new legislation prevented the government from using public funds to influence the result, and a High Court ruling required that both sides in the campaign should have equal access to airtime. As before, all mainstream political parties supported the Treaty; those opposing, the Greens, *Sinn Féin* and the Socialist Party, had between them only four seats in parliament (Gilland, 1999). The main arguments for a "no" vote centred on a perceived threat to Irish neutrality, the EU's democratic deficit, and the subordination of social to economic policy. The ICTU backed the Treaty as embodying employment and social inclusion as policy priorities of the EU. After a low-key campaign the Treaty was comfortably approved, though by a significantly smaller majority than with Maastricht.

For the vote on the Nice Treaty—the first revision to the Treaty of Rome on which Ireland alone held a referendum—the political line-up was largely the same, and the campaign centred around the familiar themes, though EU enlargement added issues regarding Ireland's increased contributions to the EU budget, the dilution of its influence on decision-making, and the opening of the labour market to eastern European workers. The "yes" campaign was widely regarded as lacklustre and ineffective (Garry *et al.*, 2005; Gilland, 2002; Qvortrup and Taffe, 2002). The arguments in favour of the Treaty were vague and inconsistent, reflecting internal dissent between and within the governing parties; effectively the "no" camp set the agenda (Hayward, 2002). Though the ICTU was strongly in favour (only one member of the executive voted against) it does not appear to have campaigned actively. There is evidence of complacency among supporters of the Treaty: in the most recent Eurobarometer survey, 75% supported Irish membership of the EU and 85% believed that Ireland had gained from membership (Qvortrup and Taffe, 2002),



and pre-referendum polls showed a large yes majority. But the result was a 54% “no” vote, on a very low turnout. Most assessments regarded the result as a reflection of lack of information and understanding of the Treaty—the main explanation given by both non-voters and “no” voters. The slogan of the opponents of Nice, “if you don’t know, vote no,” seemed to prove effective.

For the second referendum sixteen months later the “yes” camp mounted a far more active campaign (Gilland, 2003). For their part, the ICTU and its affiliates engaged far more vigorously, spelling out what were seen as the benefits for workers from the Treaty, countering the core arguments of its opponents, and denouncing “scare-mongering about floods of immigrants from Eastern Europe taking Irish jobs after enlargement” (ICTU press release, 16 October 2002).

The outcome was a much higher turnout (though still just under 50%) and a clear “yes” majority. This seemed to refute “second-order” theories (the Irish government was actually more popular at the time of the first referendum than the second) and suggested that vigorous campaigns increased the salience for voters of substantive “first-order” issues (Garry *et al.*, 2005).

A referendum on the TCE, scheduled for the autumn of 2005, was abandoned after the French and Dutch results; and as noted above, Ireland was the only country to hold a popular vote on Lisbon. While the campaign was in many respects similar to those on the three previous Treaty revisions, there were two important changes. First, Irish opposition was informed by the ideas and arguments of the 2005 French campaign, to some extent cross-fertilized by involvement in the European Social Forum. Second, the industrial relations climate had been inflamed by a bitter confrontation at the end of 2005 between the main Irish union, SIPTU, and Irish Ferries, when the company unilaterally decided to re-flag its vessels and replace the existing crews by mainly Latvian agency workers (Dobbins, 2005). There were close parallels with the *Viking* dispute following which the ECJ deemed strike action by Finnish unions to have breached EU law on freedom of establishment and of movement.

One consequence was that the trade unions were far more divided than previously. Though the ICTU endorsed Lisbon, the vote in the executive was 14 to 5 with 8 abstentions. The UK-based Unite (previously ATGWU), which had in previous referendums been the only union to advocate rejection, was on this occasion joined by the Technical, Engineering and Electrical Union (TEEU), both citing the recent ECJ judgments as reasons to vote “no.” Perhaps more importantly, SIPTU demanded a government commitment to legislate for stronger controls over agency workers and to protect trade union rights; when this was refused it made no recommendation to its members, widely seen as a tacit call to reject the Treaty.

The referendum result, a 53% no vote, was widely predicted. “Voting was heavily class-correlated” (Storey, 2008: 77), with 74% of manual workers in the “no” camp (Chari, 2008). Assessments of the result have suggested that most of those voting “no” did so on the basis of the perceived content of the Treaty, but for a multiplicity of often conflicting reasons (Holmes, 2008). However, it was widely considered that workers’ rights were one important factor. In its own reaction, the ICTU insisted that

in supporting enlargement at the time of the Nice referendums, it was not aware that the Irish labour market would be immediately opened to the new member states, and was not consulted on this; a particular problem because Ireland had a small and "virtually unregulated labour market" (ICTU Briefing July 2008).

As with the Nice Treaty, a second referendum reversed the popular verdict. At a meeting of the EU Council in December 2008, the government obtained a set of "legal guarantees" aimed at addressing issues raised by the "no" campaign. Ireland would not be subject to new rules concerning taxation, "family" issues—such as abortion, euthanasia and gay marriage—and the traditional Irish state neutrality was protected. It was also agreed that every member state would retain a commissioner after the new Treaty took effect. The Irish "protocol" would be added to the next EU accession Treaty. Perhaps more important than these concessions was the impact of the global economic crisis, which seemed to underline the vulnerability of an Ireland committed to "going it alone."

The ICTU executive again backed a "yes vote," though agreeing that affiliates could adopt their own position in the campaign. On this occasion both Unite and TEEU maintained their opposition, emphasizing "the lack of any progress in the critical area of workers' rights." However SIPTU now gave its backing to the Treaty, although expressing a series of reservations and also emphasizing that concerns over the ECJ judgments had not been adequately addressed. In the event, the result was a two to one majority in favour of Lisbon, with the highest turnout on a European referendum in Ireland since the vote on accession in 1972.

### **The British Referendum that Never Was (and Others)**

I have neither the need nor space to discuss in detail the position of the British unions, which is well documented. Britain joined the EU in 1973, under a Conservative government. After Labour was elected the following year, a referendum was held—the first and only time such a measure has been used in the UK—in June 1975, partly to resolve intense internal party conflict on the issue; the result was a two-to-one vote to remain in the EU. Majority trade union opinion, which at times expressed conditional support for membership, had hardened into complete rejection, and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) campaigned for a "no" vote. Its majority position remained hostile until the 1980s, when the "social dimension" of the EU became far preferable to the market liberalism of the Thatcher government, and it has in general supported the subsequent Treaty revisions.

The TUC general council overwhelmingly backed Maastricht and opposed calls for a referendum. Despite qualifications and internal divisions, it has supported EMU entry. Rank-and-file opinion has been far more negative: one 1999 survey found 61% of union members opposed to joining the euro, only 23% in favour (Mullen and Burkitt, 2003: 333); another found a slightly lower negative opinion, but still substantial and higher than among the population as a whole (Mulhearn, 2004: 296). A leftward switch in the leadership of two of the largest unions—Amicus in 2002, TGWU in 2003, now both amalgamated to form Unite—has resulted in a more

critical position on EU matters. In addition, the strongly pro-EU stance of the general secretary of the TUC from 1993, John Monks—who left in 2003 to head the ETUC—has been qualified by a rather more pragmatic approach by his successor Brendan Barber. In 2004 Congress deferred a decision on the TCE, but rejected the Treaty the following year, seeing it as entrenching economic liberalization. But by now the Constitution was effectively dead as a result of the French and Dutch votes, relieving the government of its promise to hold a referendum which would almost certainly have rejected the TCE.<sup>8</sup> In 2007 Congress voted in favour of a referendum on Lisbon, largely as a protest against the UK opt-out from the Charter of Fundamental Rights—although a motion to campaign for a “no” vote was defeated. But the government rejected a referendum, on the unconvincing grounds that Lisbon was a completely different document from the TCE.

Other governments followed the UK example. Writing of the French Maastricht referendum, Meunier-Aitsahalia and Ross (1993: 59) argued that “had rejection been the outcome, no future decision on monetary and political integration could have been taken without blatantly violating the democratically expressed will of the majority of French voters.” Such concerns did not deter the French government from proceeding with ratification without a new referendum. The position of the trade unions reflected their attitudes to the TCE: CFTD called for “adoption by parliament as rapidly as possible”; CGT demanded a new referendum; FO noted that its criticisms of the TCE still largely applied to Lisbon, but did not explicitly demand a referendum. In the Netherlands too, the Treaty was ratified by parliament with little public debate. The Swedish case was interesting, in that the ECJ Laval judgment was widely perceived as a direct threat to the traditional industrial relations system. The LO Congress in June 2008 rejected calls for a referendum but insisted that parliament should defer ratification until after legislative changes had been initiated which would protect the Swedish labour market from the effects of the Laval decision. In the event the Treaty was approved in November 2008 without the guarantees demanded by LO, with the support of the SAP despite strong internal opposition—but with a less overwhelming majority (mainly because of abstentions) than in other national parliaments.

Overall, most countries saw demands for referendums on the Lisbon Treaty, mainly from the left, but mainstream trade unions did not endorse these calls. This may be seen as reflecting both the assessment that the Treaty was an improvement on the existing EU arrangements, and a fear that a referendum campaign—as well as being likely to result in rejection—would expose the internal divisions within the unions themselves.

## **Conclusion: Are the Members Out of Step?**

This survey of trade unions and EU referendums in western Europe reveals considerable cross-national diversity but also some common themes. Over recent decades, two conflicting trajectories have widely occurred. The first has been a shift in trade union attitudes towards European integration from suspicion or even antagonism towards acceptance and even enthusiasm (Busemeyer *et al.*, 2008; Hyman, 2005). The “social dimension” invented by Jacques Delors to provide a human face to the completion

of the single market helped turn those trade union movements which were potential opponents into reliable allies. In an important sense, union leaders have become professional Europeans, insiders in a process of integration but with their own agenda of moderating the neoliberal priorities which have come to dominate the EU.

At the same time, the "permissive consensus" involving popular acquiescence in the elite project of Europeanization has been extensively shaken (Down and Wilson, 2008; Hurrelman, 2007; Norris, 1997). The referendums in recent years have provided a radical shock to the political class, reinforced by the success in the 2009 EP elections in many countries of far-right anti-EU nationalist parties; but—as the rebranding of the TCE into the Lisbon Treaty demonstrates—the response has been to escape the consequences of popular rejection rather than to address its causes.

Though the dynamics of each referendum campaign have been in important respects unique, four broad generalizations are possible. First, notwithstanding "second-order" theories, in most cases the electorate seems to have been motivated more by European considerations than by those of national politics. Second, the popular verdict has tended to be a "reality check" on the past evolution of European integration rather than an evaluation of the proposals supposedly on the agenda (Franklin *et al.*, 1995: 102-4). Third, the UK situation in which the "eurosceptic" agenda is shaped primarily from the political right is not typical of western Europe (though there are parallels in some of the new member states). Though hard-line Europhobia is almost exclusively a far-right phenomenon, in most of the campaigns discussed above the most prominent arguments have favoured a more social and more democratic Europe. Fourth, surveys have shown virtually without exception that manual (and to a lesser extent, routine white-collar) workers—the core constituency of trade union membership—have been disproportionately represented within the "no" camp. In this sense, the membership is clearly out of step with the policies of their unions.

What is also clear is that public attitudes towards European integration are typically complex and contradictory. This means that they are politically malleable. Can trade unions play a major role in shaping public opinion towards a progressive European politics, one which encourages "Euro-democratization" (Erne, 2008) rather than comitology and stronger social protections in place of market liberalism? These are indeed objectives set out in the programmatic statements of the ETUC and its national affiliates. But having assented to the underlying architecture of actually existing Europeanization, unions have rarely shown the will to mobilize offensively around an alternative vision of social Europe. Pressing for employee-friendly policies within the institutions of the EU, without a readiness to say "no," has two damaging consequences. First, unions' role within the policy-making process is collective begging, not collective bargaining. Second, it is left to other political forces to campaign uninhibitedly against the current bias of European integration as an elitist project which brings unemployment, labour market deregulation and the erosion of social protection. It requires a major strategic change for unions to offer an effective political antidote to the poison of ultra-nationalism and xenophobia. If they can achieve this, they might also be empowered to win greater progress towards the elusive ideal of "social Europe."

## Notes

- 1 Throughout this article I use, for simplicity, the title EU, though this has applied only since 1993.
- 2 Roberts-Thomson (2001) lists seven EU-related referendums before the SEA, and also includes a referendum in Italy on 18 June 1989 to endorse the powers of MEPs.
- 3 I am grateful to Roland Erne for information about the Swiss case. For more details see Church (2003); Kriesi and Trechsel (2008); Marquis (2004); Sciarini and Lijthaug (1997); Theiler (2004).
- 4 This paragraph is based on my own archival research at the ÖGB but also draws on Müller (2009) and Pelinka and Greiderer (1996).
- 5 The Swedish government claimed to have been accorded a similar opt-out to Denmark as part of its accession negotiations.
- 6 An interesting indication of a broader unease was the "trade union appeal in support of the TCE," published by the *Confédération française démocratique du travail* (CFDT) in collaboration with the ETUC secretariat a week before the French referendum. Only 16 of the 77 national affiliates signed up.
- 7 This paragraph is based on a variety of trade union documents available online.
- 8 Surveys showed "no" majorities fluctuating between 2:1 and 3:1 (Baines and Gill, 2006).

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## SUMMARY

### Trade Unions and "Europe": Are the Members Out of Step?

In 2005 the "Constitutional Treaty" designed to restructure the governance of the European Union (EU) was rejected in popular referendums in France and the Netherlands. Subsequently only in Ireland was a referendum held on the Lisbon Treaty, which reinstated most elements in the previous version, in June 2008. Again a negative result threw the EU into crisis, though a second Irish vote in October 2009 yielded a different result.

The "no" votes reflected a familiar pattern of popular rejection of initiatives on European integration. This article provides an overview of such referendums in western Europe, focusing in particular on the role of national trade unions in popular votes on EU accession and on Treaty revisions. It discusses trade union intervention in a dozen countries which held referendums since the Single European Act in the 1980s (and in the United Kingdom, which did not).

It is evident that while mainstream trade unions (or at least their leaders) have usually endorsed the integration process, in most countries where referendums have been held their members have voted otherwise. This has been particularly evident among manual workers. Sometimes popular attitudes have been strongly influenced by narrowly nationalistic arguments, but rejection has often been based on "progressive" rather than "reactionary" grounds. In particular, the justified view that the EU in its current direction is encouraging a neoliberal, pro-capitalist drift in social and economic policy has underlain a left-wing critique of further integration.

But having assented to the underlying architecture of actually existing Europeanization, unions have rarely shown the will to mobilize offensively around an alternative vision of social Europe. This has left the field open to right-wing nationalists (and to fringe left-wing parties with only a limited electoral base) to campaign in the "no" camp during referendums. Popular attitudes are malleable, but it requires a major strategic re-orientation if unions are to reconnect with their members in order to build a popular movement for a genuinely social Europe.

KEYWORDS: European Union, referendums, trade unions, Lisbon Treaty, neoliberalism, social Europe

## RÉSUMÉ

### Les syndicats et l'Europe : les membres sont-ils déphasés ?

En 2005, la France et les Pays-Bas rejetaient, par référendum populaire, la Constitution européenne qui devait permettre de restructurer la gouvernance de l'Union européenne. Par la suite, seule l'Irlande, en juin 2008, soumettait le Traité de Lisbonne au référendum. Ce traité rétablissait la plupart des éléments présents dans la Constitution européenne. Le résultat négatif du référendum irlandais créait une autre crise à l'intérieur de l'Union européenne, malgré le résultat positif obtenu lors du deuxième vote, en octobre 2009.

Les résultats négatifs des votes par référendum sont caractéristiques du rejet des initiatives d'intégration de l'Europe. Cet article présente une vue d'ensemble des

référendums qui se sont tenus en Europe en insistant sur le rôle des syndicats nationaux. L'auteur discute des activités menées par les syndicats dans les pays ayant tenu des référendums depuis l'Acte unique européen dans les années 1980 et au Royaume-Uni, qui n'en n'a pas tenu.

Il apparaît évident que même si les syndicats les plus importants (ou leurs dirigeants) ont généralement appuyé le processus d'intégration, leurs membres ont voté autrement dans la plupart des pays qui ont tenu des référendums. Ce constat est encore plus clair chez les travailleurs manuels. Quelquefois, les attitudes des travailleurs ont été influencées par des arguments strictement nationalistes mais le rejet a souvent pris racine sur des bases progressistes plutôt que réactionnaires. En particulier, la perception justifiée que l'Union européenne, dans sa direction actuelle, encourage un glissement des politiques économiques et sociales vers le néolibéralisme (procapitaliste) était sous-jacente aux critiques de la gauche envers une intégration plus poussée.

Mais, ayant consenti à l'architecture implicite du processus d'eupéanisation existant, les syndicats ont rarement démontré leur volonté de se mobiliser pour promouvoir une vision alternative de l'Europe. Ceci permet aux nationalistes de droite (et aux partis de gauche qui ont une base électorale limitée) de mener des campagnes dans le camp du « non » lors des référendums. Les attitudes des gens peuvent être modifiées, mais cela exigerait des syndicats une réorientation stratégique majeure s'ils veulent rétablir les ponts avec leurs membres pour permettre l'émergence d'un mouvement populaire en faveur d'une véritable Europe sociale.

MOTS-CLÉS : Union européenne, référendum, syndicat, Traité de Lisbonne, néolibéralisme, Europe sociale

## RESUMEN

### Los sindicatos y la Europa: ¿los miembros están desfasados?

En 2005, la Francia y los Países Bajos rechazaron por referéndum popular la Constitución Europea que debía permitir de reestructurar la gobernanza de la Unión Europea. Luego, en junio 2008, solo Irlanda realizaba un referéndum sobre el Tratado de Lisboa. Este tratado restablecía la mayoría de elementos presentes en la versión precedente. El resultado negativo del referéndum irlandés creó otra crisis al interior de la Unión Europea a pesar del resultado positivo obtenido con el segundo voto en octubre 2009.

Los resultados negativos de los votos por referéndum reflejan un modo familiar de rechazo popular contra las iniciativas de integración europea. Este artículo presenta una visión del conjunto de los referéndums que han tenido lugar en Europa, insistiendo sobre el rol de los sindicatos nacionales. Se discute las intervenciones sindicales en los países que han tenido referéndum después del Acta Única Europea de los años 1980 y en el Reino Unido donde no ha habido referéndum.

Resulta evidente que a pesar que los sindicatos más importantes (o al menos sus dirigentes) han apoyado generalmente el proceso de integración, sus miembros han votado de manera diferente en la mayoría de países donde ha habido referéndums. Esta constatación es aún más clara en el caso de los trabajadores manuales. Algunas veces las actitudes de los trabajadores han sido influenciadas por los argumentos estrictamente nacionalistas pero, más a menudo, el rechazo se base en fundamentos progresistas más

que en fundamentos reaccionarios. En particular, la percepción justificada que la Unión Europea, en su dirección actual, alienta un deslizamiento de políticas económicas y sociales hacia el neoliberalismo (pro capitalista) fue subyacente a las críticas de la izquierda contra una integración más avanzada.

Aunque los sindicatos han consentido a la arquitectura implícita del proceso de europeización existente, ellos han raramente demostrado su voluntad de movilizarse para promover una visión alternativa de la Europa. Esto ha permitido a los nacionalistas de derecha (y a los partidos de izquierda que tienen una base electoral limitada) de organizar campañas en el campo del "no" durante los referéndums. Las actitudes populares pueden ser maleables, pero ello exigiría una importante reorientación estratégica si los sindicatos quieren restablecer los lazos con sus miembros para permitir la emergencia de un movimiento popular en favor de una verdadera Europa social.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Unión Europea, referéndum, sindicato, Tratado de Lisboa, neoliberalismo, Europa social