

**European trade unions and free trade:
between international solidarity and perceived self-interest**

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The fight against trade liberalisation has been a defining characteristic of the global justice movement ever since its manifestation in the demonstrations against the third ministerial conference of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Seattle in 1999. The threats posed by ‘free’ trade to industrial development, labour rights, farmers’ rights, land rights, women’s rights, indigenous peoples’ rights and public services have ensured a broad opposition not only to the WTO’s Doha Round of multilateral negotiations but also to the regional and bilateral free trade agreements that have proliferated as the Doha Round lurched from crisis to collapse. Yet not all parts of the international labour movement have felt able to join this opposition, given the perception among some national and regional trade union bodies that the export opportunities offered by freer trade may be of benefit to their members as a result of their competitive advantage in international markets.

This paper seeks to explore the response of the European trade union movement to the free trade agenda of the European Union (EU). In particular, the paper traces the positioning of European trade unions over and against the EU’s Global Europe strategy,

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launched in 2006, and its successor trade strategy published in 2010. The paper contrasts the stance of the European labour movement with that of trade unions in the global South – many of whose members stand to lose their jobs and livelihoods as a direct result of the free trade agenda of the EU. The paper’s findings point to the inherent tension between the labour movement’s traditions of international solidarity, on the one hand, and the perceived self-interest of national or regional trade union entities, on the other. These findings support similar studies that highlight the structural and political challenges posed to labour’s organising strategies by the globalisation of production in the modern era (e.g. Bieler, Lindberg and Sauerborn, 2011).

European trade unions: critical support

The positioning of the European trade union movement over and against the EU’s free trade agenda has been characterised by ambivalence. In their official pronouncements, trade union confederations have been highly critical of the orientation of EU trade policy towards the interests of capital at the expense of a social agenda. At the same time, few have spoken out in opposition to the EU’s new generation of free trade agreements and many have actively supported them, preferring at best to lobby for the inclusion of social conditionalities within the agreements as a means of potentially mitigating their most damaging effects.

These contradictions are evidenced in the statements and positions adopted by the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), the umbrella body representing 83 national and 12 industry trade union confederations from across Europe. In particular, the ETUC issued a number of responses to the ‘Global Europe’ trade strategy published by the European Commission on 4 October 2006, which established the direction for the official trade policy of all the EU’s 27 member states that has been followed ever since

(European Commission, 2006). ‘Global Europe’ sought to apply the Lisbon strategy of competitiveness and open markets to the EU’s external relations by means of a new generation of bilateral free trade agreements, with the primary aim of achieving additional market access opportunities for European exporters through an ‘activist’ or ‘hard-nosed’ approach to commercial relations with EU trading partners. Explicitly designed to favour the interests of transnational capital, the strategy was widely recognised to be an assault on workers’ rights both inside and outside the EU (Bieler, 2009; Fuchs, 2007; War on Want, 2008).

In its initial press statement in response to the launch of the Global Europe strategy, released on 5 October 2006, the ETUC described itself as ‘very concerned’ at the EU’s new prioritisation of bilateral over multilateral trade negotiations. The ETUC further attacked the European Commission for failing to hold a democratic debate on its trade strategy, and for taking a ‘narrow vision’ of its responsibilities. The statement continued:

‘The Commission’s only aim is to improve European competitiveness through the increasing liberalisation of markets, services, public procurement and investments. This openly mercenary approach is at odds with the pro-multilateral and pro-sustainable development strategy defined in the 2004 Communication the “The Social Dimension of Globalisation, extending the benefits to all”.’ (ETUC, 2006a)

This criticism was echoed in the resolution on Global Europe adopted by the ETUC’s Executive Committee in December 2006. In that resolution, the ETUC put on record its ‘disagreement with the proposed general reorientation of European trade policy in

favour of an extremely aggressive liberalisation agenda in the developing countries, without consideration for possible social and ecological implications'. Once again, the ETUC attacked the new strategy as being in 'flagrant contradiction' of the European Commission's supposed commitment to improving coherence between the EU's trade policy and its developmental, social and environmental objectives (ETUC, 2006b).

That the ETUC wished these reactions to be seen as critical of the Global Europe strategy was confirmed the following May in its Activity Report to the ETUC's 11th Congress in Seville, in which the ETUC stated that it had 'condemned' Global Europe 'for being overtly geared towards bilateralism and omitting the development dimension of European trade policy' (ETUC, 2007a: 21). The then General Secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), Guy Ryder, explicitly aligned himself with the ETUC's condemnation of Global Europe, calling the strategy's approach to the issue of decent work 'unacceptable' (ITUC, 2008).

Despite the apparent strength of this criticism, however, the ETUC also registered from the start its support for a number of central aspects of the Global Europe strategy.

Firstly, the ETUC concurred with 'the necessity for the EU to be more active in... redirecting European exports to expanding markets in the emerging countries'.

Secondly, the ETUC supported the enforcement of commitments made by EU trading partners on intellectual property rights, as long as such rights 'do not affect public health and development in the developing countries' (ETUC, 2006b). In contrast to the ETUC's initial condemnation of the EU's new prioritisation of bilateral agreements, the then ETUC General Secretary John Monks, speaking at the European Commission's own conference on Global Europe in November 2006, declared that the ETUC 'is not

opposed to the development of bilateral or regional agreements. Indeed we have strongly supported them, as tools for sustainable development.’ (ETUC, 2006c)

This ambiguity was reflected in the official Strategy and Action Plan for 2007-2011 adopted by the ETUC at its May 2007 Congress in Seville, which included a section dedicated to trade (ETUC, 2007b: 129-130). Once again, the ETUC declared itself ‘opposed to any reorientation of European trade policy in favour of an aggressive liberalisation agenda in the developing countries’. Yet at the same time, the document specifically called on the EU to be ‘more active’ in ‘redirecting European exports to expanding markets in the emerging countries’, thus signalling its support for the EU’s attempts to penetrate the economies of the global South.

The ETUC necessarily mediates between the differing positions of its member federations. Yet national trade union responses from within the EU’s member states revealed similar concerns with the Global Europe strategy to those expressed by the ETUC. In October 2006, the Vienna Chamber of Labour published a critique of Global Europe entitled ‘New EU trade strategy – pure mercantilism!’, which noted that large European corporations would gain from the strategy at the expense of workers both within and outside the EU (AK Wien, 2006; cited in Fuchs, 2007: 26). The British Trades Union Congress has used similar language in criticising the ‘naked mercantilism’ of the Global Europe strategy (TUC, 2008), and has spoken out against the EU’s Economic Partnership Agreements with African, Caribbean and Pacific nation states, noting: ‘Workers’ livelihoods and hard won rights are at risk as their countries’ economies are opened to EU competition.’ (TUC, 2007)

The German Confederation of Trade Unions (DGB) was also critical in its evaluation of Global Europe, declaring in February 2007 that: ‘Europe will further lose credibility and exacerbate its political crisis if the European Commission sells the Lisbon strategy as Europe’s answer to globalisation’ (DGB, 2007; author’s translation). Yet the DGB did not take issue with the Commission’s proposal to prise open new markets in the global South on behalf of European exporters, expressing concern only that this expansionist policy would prove unsustainable unless accompanied by measures to strengthen the European single market. As noted by one delegate of German trade union IG Metall at the workshop ‘Global Europe: will the EU External Trade Strategy create more and better jobs in Europe?’ held at the European Social Forum in Malmö on 18 September 2008, the prevailing view within the export-oriented sectors of the German trade union movement is that the European Commission’s focus on penetrating emerging markets is to be welcomed as a means of safeguarding jobs in Germany.²

For trade unions representing workers in export-oriented industries, such positioning can be understood as a logical defence of their members’ interests. Yet this standpoint risks equating the interests of labour with those of capital, at the same time as conflicting with the internationalist traditions of worker solidarity across borders. As argued by one recent critique: ‘Western unions (and in particular German unions) are captured by a capitalist model based on limitless growth and accumulation, progressive appropriation of resources and riches and guaranteeing unrestricted access to developing country markets. To break with this model is not an easy task.’ (Mahnkopf, 2008: 17)

While ready to voice criticism of its shortcomings, therefore, very few European trade union confederations have actively opposed the EU’s free trade strategy. One exception

² Participant observation by the author

is Spain's anarcho-syndicalist General Confederation of Labour (CGT), which adopted a resolution at its 2008 conference condemning the Global Europe strategy as a 'grave threat to social justice, workers' rights, gender equality and environmental protection, both within and outside the EU'. The CGT – which is considerably smaller than the two main Spanish trade union confederations and is not affiliated to the ETUC – called on the incoming Spanish government not to sign the free trade agreements arising from the strategy, and instructed Spain's Congress of Deputies not to ratify them (CGT, 2008; author's translation).

In place of opposition, the mainstream European trade union movement has offered its support to the EU's free trade agreements on the understanding that they should include social chapters dealing with workers' rights, especially the core labour standards enshrined in the conventions of the International Labour Organisation (ETUC/ITUC, 2007). The ETUC's strategy of pressing for such conditionalities was developed in the context of the Doha Round of WTO negotiations, where it again supported the European Commission's ambitions to open up new markets for Europe's industrial exports in the emerging economies of the global South (ETUC, 2005a). The European Commission did not, however, reciprocate by demanding a social clause in the agreements of the WTO, having already dropped it from its agenda in the months leading up to the launch of the Doha Round in November 2001 (Orbie, Vos and Taverniers, 2005).

Although it continues to press for social chapters in the EU's free trade agreements, the ETUC has shown growing frustration at how ineffective such conditionalities have been to date. The ETUC has regularly criticised the EU's willingness to extend additional trade preferences under its enhanced Generalised System of Preferences (GSP+) to

countries with poor human rights records, given that GSP+ status is supposed to be conditional upon the effective implementation of human rights and good governance conventions (ETUC, 2005b; 2008). Speaking at a seminar organised by the Austrian Federal Chamber of Labour in September 2009 to discuss labour perspectives on free trade agreements, the ETUC's Senior Adviser Tom Jenkins acknowledged not only that there was little sign of any integration of social and environmental standards in the new generation of EU free trade agreements, but also that there had been almost no effective implementation of social clauses from earlier agreements (AK Europa, 2009).

This frustration eventually led the ETUC to withhold support for certain of the EU's new free trade agreements, albeit at a very late stage. The ETUC's Executive Committee issued a statement in December 2009 calling for suspension of the EU's free trade negotiations with Peru and Colombia in response to the continuing assassination of trade unionists in the latter country. The statement noted: 'The ETUC is concerned that the Sustainable Development Chapter being negotiated as part of the trade agreements will not provide the solid basis required to ensure that human and trade unions rights are respected. Provisions on labour rights of the EU's GSP+ agreement that apply currently, and which may be reflected in the free trade agreement, have had little moderating effect.' (ETUC, 2009) On the eve of the summit between heads of state from the EU, Latin America and Caribbean held in Madrid in May 2010, the ETUC issued a joint statement together with the ITUC and the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas, calling – in vain – for the EU's free trade agreements with Central America, Peru and Colombia not to be signed (ETUC/ITUC/TUCA, 2010; see also below).

Despite growing recognition of the ineffectuality of its previous reliance on social conditionalities, however, the ETUC has continued to support the EU's overall strategy

of pressing ahead with free trade agreements in both the multilateral and bilateral spheres. The then ETUC General Secretary John Monks joined the EU's Trade Commissioner Karel De Gucht in April 2010 in calling for a swift conclusion of the Doha Round of multilateral trade negotiations at the WTO, despite the ITUC's warning that the WTO's industrial trade negotiations remained 'an area of great danger for many developing countries, given what they stand to lose in terms of the consequences for their employment and industrial development' (ITUC, 2009). Despite the sustained opposition from Korean trade unions, Monks also welcomed the EU's new free trade agreement with South Korea as 'on balance, a good deal' (ETUC, 2010).

Southern trade unions: critical rejection

Trade unions from the global South have been sharply critical of the EU's proposed free trade agreements, seeing them as thinly disguised attempts to open up emerging markets for the benefit of European capital. The experience of such trade liberalisation in the periphery of the capitalist world system over the past 30 years has been profoundly negative, with many national economies losing substantial sections of their industrial capacity as a result of being brought into direct competition with powerful multinational corporations seeking to penetrate their markets. The consequences for jobs, wages and workers' rights have been nothing short of catastrophic. Impact assessments of the new generation of EU free trade agreements have predicted further social dislocation if they are allowed to go ahead (War on Want, 2009; George, 2010).

In view of this experience, trade unions in countries of the global South that have been engaged in negotiating free trade agreements with the EU have tended to adopt a policy of direct opposition to those agreements. Resistance has been particularly strong in Latin America, where trade unions had already developed good regional links in order

to contest the multilateral negotiations of the WTO and earlier bilateral agreements with Canada and the USA (Orsatti and Sánchez Martínez, 2008; Ciccaglione, 2009).

The Trade Union Confederation of the Americas, the regional organisation of the ITUC in the Western hemisphere, joined with trade union confederations from across the Andean region in calling for the suspension of the EU's free trade negotiations with Colombia and Peru, and their replacement with new agreements based not on free trade but on alternative models of economic and commercial cooperation. Those negotiations were initiated following the earlier refusal of the governments of Bolivia and Ecuador to agree to the EU's plans for an association agreement with all four Andean nations together (Fritz, 2010; Enlazando Alternativas, 2009). Similarly, the Central American Joint Trade Union Platform and its national chapters in Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala called for the suspension of negotiations towards the EU-Central America Association Agreement, and their replacement with new negotiations based on principles of ecological production and trade justice (PSCC, 2009).

African trade unions have mounted similar resistance to the economic partnership agreements (EPAs) which the EU has sought to negotiate with their countries. Speaking in May 2008, ITUC-Africa General Secretary Kwasi Adu-Amankwah stated: 'We join the call for the nullification of the interim EPAs and for appropriate time to be given for negotiating new trade relations between Africa and Europe that take account of Africa's genuine needs for development and regional integration.' (cited in Traidcraft, 2009). The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) has called for the outright rejection of the EU's interim EPA with the Southern African Development Community

(SADC), calling the agreement ‘anti-developmental and imperialist’ (*Times of Swaziland*, 3 May 2009).

Trade unions from the global South have also rejected the strategy of reliance on social chapters in free trade agreements, seeing them as insufficient protection against the dangers of trade liberalisation inherent in those agreements. In his presentation to the civil society week of action against EU free trade agreements held in Brussels in April 2008, Heo Young-Koo, Vice-President of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), stated: ‘KCTU believes that FTA negotiations must be stopped. We do not believe that the problems of FTAs can be solved by accepting the existing negotiations but adding additional chapters on sustainable development concerning labour and the environment.’ Heo Young-Koo outlined three main reasons for the KCTU’s taking this position, namely: (a) social chapters do not have the binding force of the central free trade provisions of the agreements, and can therefore be rendered ineffective by those provisions; (b) they fail to protect a host of important rights under threat from the free trade agreements, including the rights to food security, health, education, cultural diversity, access to natural resources and access to public services; (c) the majority of workers in developing countries fall outside the scope of such social protection clauses altogether, in that they work in the informal economy (KCTU, 2008).

This rejection of the social chapter as a sufficient protection against the threats posed by the EU’s free trade agenda is shared by European alter-globalisation organisations that are active on trade policy issues. These organisations have long argued that the EU’s free trade ambitions – whether multilateral or bilateral – pose such severe structural threats that they are to be opposed rather than mitigated (Seattle to Brussels Network, 2006). On this understanding, social chapters offer no protection against the principal

threats posed by free trade agreements to industrial capacity, jobs and workers' rights (War on Want, 2009). This wholesale opposition to the EU's free trade agenda is consonant with the rejectionist position of social movements and the broader mass of civil society groups in the global South, as expressed in numerous declarations over recent years.

Potential collaboration

While European trade unions have taken a less oppositional line than Southern trade unions towards the free trade ambitions of the EU, it would be wrong to suggest that there has been no opportunity for joint positioning. Indeed, several European trade unions have been willing to participate in collaborative statements that reject the free trade agenda more directly, especially when these have been drawn up in conjunction with trade unions from the global South.

One important example of this came with the international call to 'Stop the WTO negotiations! Save jobs!' which was coordinated by the global union federation Public Services International and issued prior to the WTO's sixth ministerial conference in Hong Kong in December 2005. The statement called for an immediate moratorium on the WTO negotiations in view of the potential for 'an immense new wave of unemployment and the worsening of existing jobs and livelihoods' if the Doha Round were allowed to continue to its conclusion. In addition to trade union signatories from the global South, Canada, the USA and several other global union federations, the statement was also signed by individual trade unions from Britain, Denmark, France, Germany, Iceland, Norway and Spain. Furthermore, the statement was signed by the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU), which represents over eight million public sector workers in more than 200 trade unions across Europe (PSI, 2005).

European trade unions have also taken part in joint mobilisations against free trade agreements at the national level. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions took action in April 2007 as a member of the Trade Matters coalition, in a protest outside the German embassy in Dublin to call for a halt to EPA negotiations (ICTU, 2007). The British TUC was a leading member of the Put People First coalition formed in the run-up to the G20 summit held in London in April 2009, whose policy manifesto called for world leaders to abandon their attempts to rush through a conclusion of the WTO's Doha Round (Put People First, 2009). The Belgian confederations FGTB-ABVV and CSC-ACV co-sponsored the joint seminar on 'The EU's aggressive liberalisation agenda' held with a number of other civil society groups at the European Social Forum in Athens in May 2006, alongside the major German public sector trade union Verdi and France's General Confederation of Labour (CGT). Many other such collaborations have taken place in recent years, especially with public sector trade unions joining forces with local government and civil society groups to defend public services from the liberalisation of services trade. Trade unions have also undertaken their own education and awareness raising amongst their members on the potential threats of the EU's free trade agenda, as well as establishing research projects such as the joint initiative between EPSU and the Austrian Federal Chamber of Labour on the impact of EU free trade agreements on public services (see Krajewski, 2011).

Perhaps the most significant development in respect of the positioning of international trade union structures on free trade has come as a result of collaboration between trade union confederations of the so-called 'NAMA 11' countries. This informal grouping comprises trade union confederations from countries whose government delegations have constructed joint positions of resistance within the non-agricultural market access

(NAMA) negotiations at the WTO (Hilary, 2005). The NAMA 11 trade union grouping was first formed at the end of 2006, and has seen active membership from Argentina (CGT), Brazil (CUT), South Africa (COSATU), Tunisia (UGTT), India (HMS), Indonesia (KSBSI), the Philippines (TUCP and APL) and Namibia (NUNW). Other confederations that have signed on to joint statements of the group include FEDUSA (South Africa) and CITU (Indonesia), as well as unions from Egypt and Venezuela (Busser, 2009).

The NAMA 11 trade union group has drawn particular attention to the potential impacts of trade liberalisation on the industrial development and employment prospects of their economies. This assessment was confirmed by the ITUC (at that time, the ICFTU) on the basis of its earlier simulations of the effect of proposed NAMA tariff reductions on labour-intensive industries in 13 countries of the global South (ICFTU, 2006).

Following a statement from the NAMA 11 group issued a month before the WTO's July 2007 mini-ministerial conference, the ITUC General Council adopted a resolution calling on all ITUC affiliates to take action in support of the NAMA 11 trade unions' position (ITUC, 2007). The Global Unions' statement of priorities distributed by the ITUC prior to the WTO's seventh ministerial conference in Geneva in 2009 built on this position further, and instructed WTO member governments not to sign up to the NAMA package on the table (ITUC 2009b). This rejection of a potential WTO deal marks a significant development from the ITUC's earlier reliance on social clauses as a means of mitigating the worst effects of trade liberalisation, towards a position where the ITUC is prepared to withhold its support for free trade agreements based on calculations of the predicted impact of the agreements themselves.

While the ITUC was developing its positioning to reflect more closely the concerns of trade unions from the global South, however, in ‘an unprecedented move’ three European sectoral trade union federations issued a joint statement with their respective employer federations to express support for the European Commission’s demand for industrial market opening in developing countries (EMF 2008a). Following the subsequent collapse of WTO negotiations in July 2008, the European Metalworkers’ Federation (EMF) issued a further joint statement with the European Automobile Manufacturers Association criticising developing countries for protecting their automobile industries from European competition. The statement demanded a review of the Doha Round in order to secure reciprocal market access for European exporters in emerging markets, as well as an end to the flexibilities and non-tariff barriers which the NAMA 11 trade unions had fought so hard to defend (EMF, 2008b).

This identification of European trade unionists’ interests with the ambitions of European corporations seeking to penetrate the emerging markets of the global South was met with surprise and disappointment on the part of the NAMA 11 trade unions, not least because it went against the earlier ITUC General Council resolution instructing affiliates to support the NAMA 11 trade unions’ position (Busser, 2009). In South Africa, the Central Executive Committee of COSATU declared that the EMF’s actions had threatened the unity of the ITUC itself, and noted that the NAMA 11 trade unions were writing a protest letter over the issue to all ITUC affiliates (COSATU, 2008).

Crisis and the new EU trade strategy

The EU launched its new trade strategy, entitled ‘Trade, Growth and World Affairs’, on 9 November 2010. The strategy aims to situate EU trade and investment policy (the Lisbon Treaty having extended the EU’s exclusive competence to cover foreign direct

investment as well as trade) within the broader Europe 2020 growth strategy. Despite the global economic crisis resulting from 30 years' pursuit of market liberalisation, and the cataclysm facing EU member states in particular, the new EU strategy signalled a continuation of the Global Europe agenda rather than any reconsideration of that agenda in light of current events. The strategy confirmed that, despite the 'profound changes' experienced by the world economy in recent times, a large part of the EU's energy would be spent on delivering the 'free trade agreements put forward as priorities by the Commission in its Global Europe strategy' (European Commission, 2010: 4-5).

Six months later, in May 2011, the ETUC held its 12th Congress in Athens. No venue could have been more appropriate in view of the savage austerity measures being visited on the Greek people, and the drastic impacts of those measures on public sector workers, public services and social welfare. The Athens Manifesto adopted by the Congress committed the ETUC to fight 'against austerity governance, cuts in pay, social security and public services; and for a European economic governance that serves the interests of the European people and not the markets' (ETUC 2011a).

Despite this heightened political context and the threats posed by the EU's pursuit of further market liberalisation both inside and outside Europe, the ETUC still refrained from opposition to the EU's free trade agenda. Instead, the Strategy and Action Plan for 2011-2015 adopted by the ETUC's Athens Congress stated that the ETUC would 'continue to support' the development of EU bilateral agreements, although it signalled that the ETUC would oppose those agreements that 'do not meet our essential conditions' – in particular, in light of the continuing murders of trade unionists there, the EU's agreement with Colombia. The plan emphasised continuity with the ETUC's earlier promotion of social clauses in both WTO and bilateral negotiations, and called

for future trade agreements to include ‘provisions on workers’ rights and environmental provisions so as to support minimum rights at world level and not encourage the liberalisation and/or the privatisation of public services’ (ETUC 2011b: 71-74).

The ETUC’s continuing support for the EU’s free trade agreements reveals the contradiction faced by trade union bodies between national / regional imperatives and internationalist traditions of solidarity across borders. In the ETUC’s case, this is partly due to the perception – especially in the export-oriented industries and economies of Europe – that European workers’ interests will be best served through the increased expansion of European capital worldwide. However, previous collaboration between European trade unions and their counterparts from the labour movement in the global South has shown that these positions are not immutable. As European trade unions become increasingly frustrated with the ineffectiveness of a strategy reliant on social conditionalities, they may also become more receptive to approaches that reject the EU’s liberalisation agenda outright and mobilise for progressive global solutions to the menace of free trade.

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