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Workers movement

# The European trade union movement today - a rapid overview

- IV Online magazine - 2006 - IV380 - July-August 2006 -

Publication date: Monday 7 August 2006

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**The neo-liberal policies of the last twenty years have had important consequences for the trade union movement. We have, however, to make a distinction between the objective effects, those that are so to speak interiorised, of these policies on the trade union movement as a result of the transformation of work and of the forms of employment, and the measures taken by the ruling class and its representatives in the parliaments by means of changes in legislation that are explicitly directed against the unions.**

### 1. Preamble

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/seat-2.jpg>]

In what follows we will avoid using fashionable terms such as "neo-liberal policies" and "globalisation". This is for the following reasons:

First of all, they lead to confusion, because they amount to implicitly affirming that we are seeing at the present time a new phase of development of the capitalist system. This is not the case. We are still in the period that Mandel designated by the name of "late capitalism" or "the old age of capitalism" and all the characteristics of this period that he defined correspond to the present development of the policies of capital. The only thing that has changed is the speed at which capitalism has imposed itself everywhere in the world. This formidable acceleration dates from the collapse of the Eastern bloc.

Secondly, the term globalisation is just another denomination to designate a tendency that is inherent in capitalism, its expansion throughout the entire world - which is therefore in no way a qualitative change.

Thirdly, the concept of "neo-liberalism" is an imprecise term, because in reality there are several neo-liberal schools, some of which are very far from the present economic policies based on supply (thus, the classic German neo-liberalism of the school of Eucken, Ropke etc., envisages state intervention in economic life).

And fourthly, these two concepts are often used in a sense that lets it be understood that there exists "another capitalism"- in the same category of ideas there also appear zoological classification such as, for example, "capitalism". It is absolutely necessary to put forward the objection that, today as yesterday, we are dealing with capitalism in the ordinary sense of the term and that the question of knowing whether it is more or less "rapacious" depends only on the relationship of forces in society.

And there is the subject, because what is decisive for evaluating this relationship of forces is the state of the workers organisations.

### 2. Liberal economic policies and their consequences for the trade union movement

On the European and world scale, we are still in a phase of a dominantly depressive long wave. The objective of the class in power over the last twenty years has been to find a solution to get out of the ongoing economic crisis, a solution that would quite simply enable it to raise the rate of profit thanks to a whole series of measures.

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Basically, it's a question of the following points which we will deal with in a more thorough way later on:

- Increasing casualisation of working conditions. As we can see for example in Germany, there is a drastic diminution of so-called "normal working conditions" in other words a full-time job with a permanent contract.
  
- An attempt to import cheap labour: in this domain the Bolkestein directive was meant to be a decisive step forward for capital.
  
- Reduction of costs in the social field (lowering of pensions and reduction of sickness benefits, etc.), thanks to privatisation and the cutting of subsidies.
  
- Internationalisation of production (within and outside Europe). That is what we call today "globalisation", which from a qualitative point of view is not new. The difference is that today, on the one hand this process has considerably increased and on the other hand, because of the technological revolution, the transfer of units of production is easier and faster than ever, which means that production becomes located above all where wage costs are lowest.
  
- Reduction of taxes for the rich.
  
- Maximum utilisation of the possibilities of the technological revolution: rationalisation, automation, lean production.

All these measures have been more or less applied in all the countries of Europe, but all of them have not been applied in every country at the same time and to the same degree. That is what explains in part the unequal development of national economies, considered within the European Union. In this process a part of the measures that we have mentioned, in particular the internationalisation of production, is used as a threat against the working class of the country and its organization. The ruling class pursues, with this global policy, two important objectives:

1. To make the European Union the most powerful and most dynamic economic bloc in the world. That is what is involved in the "Lisbon process":
  
2. To overcome the crisis of the fall in the rate of profit.

### **3. Policies that are directly aimed against the trade union movement**

Here, we must not ignore the fact that there exist different strategies in different countries and that it is therefore difficult to proceed to a generalisation.

The explanation for this is that there subsist in the different countries different judicial rules defining trade union rights. As a consequences, the way of acting openly against these rights, with the aim of putting in place the conditions for the policies described in point 2, will be different in each country.

In Germany, for example, the rights of the trade unions, particularly the right to strike, have always been very strongly codified. A strike is only authorised in the case of negotiations concerning wages or the terms of the work contract, political strikes are in general illegal and there are certain rules which restrict trade union activities. Furthermore, in Germany social democracy has exercised and continues to exercise a strong direct influence on the DGB (the general trade union confederation), an influence that is not in any significant fashion contested in the country. That is

why the need to change the legislation concerning the unions has not been felt in Germany, even though some judicial decisions have introduced certain restrictions.

In most of the other countries of the EU there are several trade union confederations, linked to different political currents or parties, but mainly to parties that defend the dominant political and economic ideology (except in Spain).

The country that has suffered the hardest attacks against trade union rights is Britain, where in the 1980s, under the Thatcher government, the unions suffered considerable losses in strength and in influence, because of significant changes in the legislation.

We do not think that it is the measures taken against the trade union movement, including legislative measures, which best explain the situation of the unions. It is certainly the liberal offensive of the last 25 years that has played an essential role, but the trade union leaderships totally capitulated in front of it by allowing themselves to be caught up in the inherent logic of liberal economic policies.

### 4. The Detailed Effects of Liberal Economic Policies

With the help of some figures and statistics, we will try to sketch some elements of this evolution and its background. This description cannot be exhaustive, but it will contribute to an understanding of the resemblances, but also the differences in the evolution of the trade union movement in the different European countries.

#### 4.1 The Transformation of the Labour Market

The following graph has been built up starting from figures from the German Federal Republic, but the general evolution that is perceptible here can be observed in the whole of Europe. As we can see, working conditions have been dramatically transformed. In 1980 we still had in Germany 80% of workers who benefited from normal working conditions, that is, full-time and unlimited contracts, whereas all the other forms of work, such as part-time work, short-term contracts, casual jobs, occupied a negligible place - temporary work was practically non-existent. Today, normal working conditions represent less than 50% and the tendency is still downwards. The most important increase is in the number of part-time workers and of mini-jobs and limited term contracts.

Temporary work has also increased enormously. It is particularly interesting to observe the increase in the number of self-employed workers, who do work that is outsourced by enterprises. These workers, who previously carried out the same work as wage earners, now do so as self-employed workers. In general, they work for the same company as before, but they themselves take on the risks and very often have markedly clearly inferior revenues. That has, of course, non-negligible effects on the fighting ability of unions in certain sectors, since the workers who are supposedly self-employed are no longer unionised and are even less easy to mobilise.

It is the same for workers who are employed on short-term contracts, casual workers and temporary workers. These people are for almost identical reasons very hard to mobilise for trade union action.

It would of course be a mistake to present this evolution as the culmination of a consciously worked-out plot against the workers' movement. What is involved here is essentially a consequence of the capitalist strategy we spoke of above, with the aim of reconstituting their rates of profit. It is not necessary to develop here how the flexibilisation of working conditions has consequences which make resistance from the working class and its trade union organisations difficult, indeed is some sectors impossible, and this obviously has a positive secondary effect for the employers.

The repercussions on workers' consciousness of this transformation of the reality of the working class, particularly the increasing rise of individualism, very noticeable among self-employed workers, as well as the accompanying loss of trade union consciousness, are taking on an importance that is difficult to appreciate with any accuracy.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/tab1.jpg>]

### Table 1

We can see here (Table 1) that because of this dramatic transformation of the structure of work, on the one hand the fighting capacities of trade union organisations have been considerably reduced, and on the other that for many workers, it has had negative consequences for trade union consciousness.

#### 4.2 The evolution of trade union membership

At first sight, we could think that Table 2, which follows, partly contradicts the evolution described in the preceding paragraph. As we can see, trade union membership in continental Europe, that is to say in Austria, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands and France, but also in Ireland and Britain, has fallen continuously since 1980 at least (this is also true for Japan and the United States).

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/tab2.jpg>]

### Table 2

In the Scandinavian countries and in Belgium the situation is quite different. We have in these two cases a regular increase in membership, or at the very least a stabilisation of the number of members in the same period.

But this evolution, at first sight very divergent between Scandinavia and the rest of Europe, is explained by other factors. Changes such as those which have occurred in the structure of work do not act in a linear way on the degree of trade union organisation. Other factors also play a role : we will come back later to the most important of them. The level of unionisation does not allow us to draw conclusions as to how strong struggles are in the countries concerned.

But it should not be forgotten that not only in Europe, but also in the industrialised countries outside Europe, the liberal economic offensive of the last 25 years has had the effect of considerably reducing the level of unionisation. One of the main reasons for this is undoubtedly the modification of working conditions described above.

#### 4.3 The development of working-class struggles

It is interesting to consider the evolution of the number and the length of strikes in the course of the last 15 years (Table 3). Two things stand out clearly: first of all, we see that there is no automatic correlation between the degree of trade union organisation and the number of strike days.

### Table 3

Length of Strikes: Number of Days Lost per 1000 workers

Country	Average 1990-2003	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
Belgium	31	34	22	65	18	23	32	46
Denmark	163	42	30	27	50	33	81	31

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Germany	14	42	30	27	18	7	7	3
Finland	173	446	230	41	10	309	547	11
France	104	67	48	37	49	40	291	54
Greece	241	1720	432	209	116	47	31	52
Britain	36	82	33	24	30	13	18	55
Ireland	124	266	100	218	70	28	128	107
Italy	157	342	195	179	236	237	57	119
Luxemburg					0	0	60	2
Netherlands	25	37	17	15	8	8	122	1
Austria	40	3	19	8	4	0	0	0
Portugal	46	63	53	83	24	30	19	16
Sweden	57	191	5	7	54	15	162	16
Spain	338	283	486	701	147	732	121	123
EU (15)	81	175	120	133	84	133	92	53
Zone Euro	92	197	144	162	97	164	105	54
Estonia							0	0
Latvia							0	0
Lithuania								
Malta				1	20	21	38	114
Poland						58	6	8
Slovakia				7	0	8	0	0
Slovenia								
Czech Rep				5	0	1	1	5
Hungary				1	2	10	94	1

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Cyprus									
Switzerl'd	2	1	0	0	0	4	0	2	
Norway	79	79	1	207	19	54	26	279	
USA	44	55	43	37	36	45	51	42	
Japan	2	3	2	5	2	2	1	1	

Country	Average 1990-2003	...	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Belgium	31	...	13	27		8	41	18		
Denmark	163	...	41	1250	36	48	23	75	21	30
Germany	14	...	2	1	2	0	1	9	5	1
Finland	173	...	48	61	10	110	26	31	28	18
France	104	...	29	55	56	102	74	44	193	
Greece	241	...	26	18						
Britain	36	...	10	11	10	20	20	51	19	34
Ireland	124	...	66	31	164	70	80	15	25	13
Italy	157	...	72	33	54	51	57	49	45	38
Luxemburg		...	0	0	0	5	0	0	0	
Netherlands	25	...	2	5	11	1	6	354	2	
Austria	40	...	6	0	0	1	0	3	393	0
Portugal	46	...	36	44	31	19	18	44	22	18
Sweden	57	...	6	0	20	0	3	0	152	4
Spain	338	...	138	92	102	233	119	297	46	249
EU (15)	81	...	36	49	35	56	40	63	59	
Zone Euro	92	...	42	34	41	66	45	67	66	

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Estonia		...	0	0	0	0	0	0	21	0
Latvia		...	0	0	37	0	0	4	0	0
Lithuania		...				10	2	0	0	0
Malta		...	110	14	9	32	19	5	22	11
Poland		...	3	4	11	8	0	0	1	0
Slovakia		...	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Slovenia		...								
Czech Rep		...								
Hungary		...	1	0	11	55	3	1	1	7
Cyprus		...			111	5	18	26	29	37
Switzerl'd	2	...	0	7	1	1	6	6	2	
Norway	79	...	3	137	3	233	0	70	0	66
USA	44	...	38	42	16	161	9	5	32	
Japan	2	...	2	2	2	1	1	0		

It is true that in a series of countries, particularly in Germany, the numbers of days lost because of strikes by thousands of workers has decreased, parallel to the continuing fall in the level of unionisation. However, elsewhere there are countries, for example France, where at the start of the phase the weak degree of unionisation did not prevent the maintenance of a relatively high number of strikes in comparison with other countries.

To explain that, it must not be forgotten that the right to strike has a different legal status depending on which country. So in Germany, it is codified in a very restrictive way. Political strikes are in general forbidden. Solidarity strikes are only authorised in a very limited framework. But if we consider the European Union or the Euro zone, we have to take note that on average, we are seeing regular fall in the number of strikes since 1990.

The following graph (Table 4) shows the average number of strike days per year per 1,000 workers during the period 1995-2003. We can make two observations: first of all, the countries which have by far the lowest number of strike days are the countries of Eastern Europe, which after the dissolution of Comecon experienced a dramatic process of de-industrialisation and which have thus lost "the biggest battalions" of trade union members.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/tab4.jpg>]

**Table 4**

It is also interesting to observe that during this period Germany had a low number of strikes. There are two reasons for that: on the one hand, East Germany experienced, after the Wall came down, the same process of de-industrialisation, with the same consequences (high unemployment and the disappearance of stable jobs), and on the other hand economic growth in Germany since 1990 has been markedly weaker than in the other Western countries of the European Union.

And that is the second interesting point: we can see that, with a few reservations, the importance of the number of strike days is in correlation with economic growth. It is in Denmark that we have seen, since 1990, the highest average number of strike days, and it is also in Denmark, along with Finland, that economic growth has been strongest.

However it must be noted that historical factors are also to be taken into account; in countries like Spain, France, and Italy the habit of struggle is firmly embedded and because of that it is independent of the level of unionisation. This is for a multiplicity of reasons which we will not go into here.

#### 4.4 Degree of organisation and contractual system

In the graph which follows (Table 5), a bourgeois economist tried, in 2002, to show the relationship between the level of unionisation - the percentage of workers who are organised - and the way in which the system of collective bargaining is regulated, the degree of extension of collective bargaining, in other words to what extent the collective agreements negotiated by the unions apply to all workers. In the graph, we can see that it is possible to proceed to different regroupments according to the economic system and the type of trade union organisation which predominates in the groups of countries. Of course, it is not here either a question of ideal forms, but of certain transitions. The author basically differentiates between three types: a decentralised and deregulated economy, what he calls the free market economy; next, Rhenish capitalism, in which there is a power of regulation by the unions, with state intervention and powerful workers' organisations; and lastly, co-operativism, with highly centralised unions which have an ability to regulate.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/tab5.jpg>]

#### **Table 5**

Here we find the solution to the problem evoked in paragraph 4.1, that is that the Scandinavian unions, particularly in Sweden, have a level of unionisation of more than 80 per cent, but that on the other hand the frequency of struggles is in no way comparable. This results from the fact that in a system of co-operation, the unions take on part of the functions that would be the responsibility of the state in another system. Belonging to the union plays a role of social protection.

To sum up, this graph shows that in a system of co-operation, the degree of unionisation attains its maximum level, while in the system called Rhenish capitalism, the degree of organisation is rather weak compared to the extent to which workers are covered by collective bargaining agreements, which is identical or even superior to it. The decentralised and deregulated system, which is prevalent in the liberal market economy, is marked by an average level of unionisation and a low degree of cover by collective bargaining agreements.

If we now compare this with the figures presented earlier concerning the number of strikes, we see that generally speaking the most liberal economic systems also have the lowest number of strike days.

#### 4.5 Women in the unions

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/tab6.jpg>]

#### **Table 6**

An important change in the trade union movement over the last 30 years is the change in the level of unionisation of women workers. We present here the comparative figures in 1970 and 2001 for three countries. In general, the number of women who are unionised has increased by 100 per cent over the period. The reasons for this are partly the explosive growth of women's employment and partly also the fall in the number of male trade unionists. However, it must be noted that these important structural changes have in the majority of countries found very little reflection at the higher levels of the union hierarchies.

### 5. Conclusions

We had over these 25 years a situation:

- of economic crisis.
- of a decline in the activity of the class struggle, with symbolic defeats (the British miners in the 1980s).
- of political accommodation and capitulation by the main trade union organisations in the capitalist countries of Europe in the face of the liberal offensive of Capital.
- of a general decline in the level of unionisation.

In the last three years, it seems, according to recent figures, that a turnaround is taking place - the number of strike days (and in some places the level of unionisation) is on the increase and we have seen a succession of economic and political struggles led by the unions, but:

- Almost all these struggles (and their number is growing) are of a defensive nature. In Germany for example they are directed against the attempt to lengthen working hours, lower wages and make working conditions even harder.
- Faced with the European employers, who have developed a common strategy against the working class, there does not exist any visible common strategy of the trade union organisations (with the exception of the transport unions, which have successfully organised action against the directive on transport in the European Union) and there are very few joint actions.
- The unions are still too national.
- A large part of the trade union leaderships is closely linked to parties which defend a line of liberal market policies and/or which are purely and simply corrupt.

The essential task of the European trade union movement in the coming years is to oppose the European strategy of the employers, which manifests itself on the economic level in a visible way by aggravated job flexibility and mobility. On the political level, it is to oppose projects such as the Lisbon Agenda and the attempt to put it into practice thanks to a battery of specific measures, including the directive on transport, the Bolkestein directive and the projected Constitution.

It is a question of opposing that with a unitary cross-border European trade union strategy that really organises action, which necessitates going beyond the framework of the present purely bureaucratic international trade union organisations.