

SOCIAL DEMOCRACY AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

Why European Social Democrats turned their backs on ‘social Europe’

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After the 1968 uprisings, European left parties responded to the crisis of social democracy and of Keynesianism by proposing more radical reforms to be carried out at a European level. The failure of this ambitious ‘social Europe’ project and the affirmation, instead, of a neoliberal Europe holds lessons for today’s left – whether or not it still believes that the EU can be changed.

As European elections are approaching in 2024, voices on the left have begun to claim that new political momentum has emerged for a progressive social and ecological transformation of ‘Europe’. The health, climate and geopolitical crises have – they claim – forced the European Union (EU) to open

breaches into the ‘Maastricht consensus’. For instance, the ‘Stability Pact’ has been suspended, an unprecedented solidarity mechanism has been created with a €750 billion ‘Next Generation EU’ package supported by the creation of mutual bonds marks, and an embryonic social insurance policy (SURE) has been created.¹

Assuming that there really is, today, a window of opportunity to change the EU, how could the European left make sure it is not shut down by neoliberal and conservative forces with a reaffirmation of austerity and deregulation rules? Looking at the forgotten history of the European left’s struggle for a ‘social Europe’ may offer valuable lessons. Internal divisions, strategic weaknesses and lack of popular thrust were the main reasons why ‘social Europe’ never saw the light of day.

When ‘social Europe’ was an option

‘Social Europe’ has been a promise of the European centre-left in the run-up to each and every European election or referendum since 1979. So much so that for some years now the idea of a ‘social Europe’ has started to lose its appeal, often mocked as a dream that will never materialise, or more harshly attacked as an ‘alibi’ used to disguise the realities of an economically liberal EU.² Some even consider ‘social Europe’ oxymoronic, as European integration plans were from the outset designed as a US-driven liberal and capitalist economic project.³ Indeed, from the first decades after the Second World War, European integration was heavily weighted towards economic cooperation and economic liberalism to the neglect of social issues. European integration was at that point driven largely by conservative forces, with the left playing only a marginal role.⁴

But although it is largely forgotten today, there was a time, half a century ago, when an alternative ‘Europe’ was within reach. The critical highpoint of ‘social Europe’ as a political project was reached in what we could call the ‘long 1970s’ – roughly stretching between the late 1960s and the mid-1980s. During those years, a part of the European left – which had previously been divided, often hostile, towards postwar Western European unity plans – tried to imagine and promote an alternative European unity project. This project aimed to turn ‘Europe’ into an instrument serving social progress and working-class interests, starting with the European Community (EC), the forerunner of the EU.⁵ This alternative European project, imagined primarily by European socialists, favoured, for instance, wealth redistribution, market regulation, social and economic planning, economic democratisation, upward harmonisation of European social and fiscal regimes, improved working and living conditions, and a reduction of working time.⁶ It also included environmental concerns, proposals for a democratisation of European institutions, and claims to rebalance the international system to favour the development of the rising

'Third World'. 'Social Europe' was, in short, a proposal for a rather different future than the one we inhabit today.

In those years the European left had wind in its sails. The long 1970s were a time of great social contestation across Europe, which surfaced with the famous protests of 1968. They were also the culmination of the post-1945 golden years of Western European social democracy (some would say its Indian summer), during which social democrats led governments across Europe, and social democratic leaders such as Olof Palme, Willy Brandt, and Harold Wilson were prominent figures on the world stage. At the same time, new prospects seemed to be opening for Western European communists, who saw remarkable electoral successes, especially in France and Italy. European trade unions also reached a peak, especially in terms of membership and combativity.

By the mid-1970s, therefore, the left dominated European institutions; a broad alliance of the European left in support of an alternative European project was – at least in theory – conceivable. During the 1970s, socialist parties, trade unions and (to a lesser extent) communist parties, significantly increased their transnational cooperation in order to influence European politics.⁷ The creation of the Confederation of Socialist Parties of the European Community in 1974 (the forerunner of the Party of European Socialists), and of the European Trade Union Confederation in 1973 (which brought together, for the first time in the cold war era, trade unions from social democratic, social Christian, and communist traditions and represented 40 million workers across Europe) marked important advancements in this Europeanisation process.

The new 'social Europe' project emerged in the 1970s and developed as the decade wore on. German chancellor Willy Brandt promoted the idea of a 'European social union', while the new French socialist party, allied with the communists from 1972, pushed for a radical reform of 'business Europe'. In April 1973, in Bonn, the socialist parties of the EC adopted their first programme 'For a Social Europe'; in the following years they worked on their first, rather radical, common European manifesto. For their part, European trade unions also formulated a detailed and combative 'workers' Europe' programme (in many ways similar to the socialists' one) that proposed a European alternative to neoliberal solutions including greater control of capital, democratic planning, and workers' control of industry.

Several 'social Europe' proposals made their way onto the agenda of European policymakers in those years. The efforts of the European left were crucial in leading, in 1974, to the first Social Action Programme (SAP) adopted by the EC, which resulted in the adoption of a number of directives and measures. These included the enhancement of the European Social Fund and the creation of European agencies for vocational training as well as living and working conditions. Progress

was particularly marked with regards to gender equality and health and safety at work.

However, in the following years, the European left's vision for Europe would increasingly lose out to more conservative formulas. Between 1979 and 1982, the right came back to power in the UK, the US, and West Germany when Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and Helmut Kohl were elected. By the mid-1980s, after a series of hard tussles over some of the key proposals for a 'social Europe'— in particular those regarding working time and workers' rights to information and consultation in multinational companies (the 'Vredeling directive') – it was evident that 'Europe' was taking a different road from that envisaged by the European left. The window of opportunity that had opened in the late 1960s was closing. After 1986, the implementation of the single market programme and the economic and monetary union (EMU), saw increasing liberalisation and budgetary constraint, putting national welfare states under pressure. 'Social Europe' – or, rather, that particular idea of 'social Europe' that had been supported by the left during the long 1970s – had been defeated.

Why this road was not taken

There were many complex reasons why the 'social Europe' road was not taken. Some of them were exogenous to the European left. The increasing popularity of 'neoliberal' solutions was one of them. There were also structural and institutional factors that favoured a market-oriented Europe. Most social and fiscal policy issues remained excluded from EC competences – or if not, were subject to a unanimity vote in the Council. The peculiar institutional decision-making process of the EC/ EU also made 'negative integration' – that is, EU-wide economic deregulation and liberalisation – easier than 'positive integration'.⁸ Moreover, differences in social policy across EU states also mattered: with successive rounds of European enlargement, the increasingly complex variety of social models made harmonisation more and more difficult.⁹

However, there were also reasons that were endogenous to the European left, and these ultimately proved decisive. Internal divisions within the social democratic family regarding European policy and strategies for opposing rising neoliberal ideas were wide ranging and tenacious, and had very concrete consequences for the left's (in)ability to present a united front within European institutions in support of 'social Europe' proposals. There were important divergences between some 'southern' socialists like the French socialist party PS (which was promoting self-management, economic planning from the regional to the European level, and alliance with communists) and some 'Northern' social democrats like the German

social democratic party SPD (which advocated co-determination, were more reluctant to talk about economic planning and nationalisation and tended to reject alliances with communists). But there were also widespread internal divisions within social democratic parties – most notably between the new left-wing currents of European socialism supported by young rank and file activists, which promoted alternative economic strategies that sought to constrain private enterprise, extend the public sector, and increase control over capital, and the ‘mainstream’ of European social democracy that then favoured merely a strengthened form of Keynesian welfare capitalism (not to mention the more right-wing currents to which both Helmut Schmidt and James Callaghan belonged).

These tensions remained constant amidst efforts to increase cooperation between unions and parties at European level throughout the 1970s. Although there was broad agreement on generic themes (such as upward social harmonisation and working time reduction), there were major disagreements on important institutional questions such as the powers of the European Parliament (EP) or workers’ participation in industrial management, or even, on the need to break with capitalism. Besides, the structures charged with ensuring their international and European coordination remained relatively weak in their capabilities, under-resourced and essentially non-binding in their decisions. For instance, after several years of laborious discussions, the socialist parties of the EC gave up on the adoption of a *binding* common electoral platform for the first European elections.

The British Labour Party’s ambivalence towards the EC also put obstacles in the way of a ‘social Europe’. The prospect of the UK’s accession had represented one of the main hopes of European socialists to push the EC to the left in the early 1970s. The party’s decision to ‘boycott’ European institutions until the 1975 referendum, and then to stay away from the preparation of the common European socialist manifesto in the following years, weakened the socialist front. In the early 1980s, after losing the election to Margaret Thatcher, Labour returned to an explicitly Eurosceptic position, thus disavowing the feasibility of the ‘social Europe’ project.¹⁰

Besides internal divisions, another key cause of the failure of the ‘social Europe’ project was the left’s inability to build a broad coalition at European level. Although all agreed that a wide coalition was necessary, socialist parties consistently disagreed on what it should look like. Some, like the French socialists, favoured a European-level ‘Union of the Left’ with communist parties – many of which were then adopting ‘Eurocommunist’ strategies. Other socialist parties rejected this idea and preferred to look right to ‘democratic and progressive’ forces among the Christian-democratic and liberal party families. The leadership of the German SPD for instance was firm in its opposition to any form of collaboration with communist

parties. The question remained intensely debated throughout the decade and created stark tensions within the European left.¹¹

Even beyond such divisions, the European left mostly lacked the strategic skills needed to effectively push their agenda at the European level. By contrast, business lobbying of European institutions was burgeoning.¹² When the discussions on the Vredeling Directive at the beginning of the 1980s saw the unleashing of the most expensive and intensive lobbying campaign in the EP's history, European trade unions and social democratic parties both proved unable to compete with the intense and multi-level lobbying efforts of business circles.

Moreover, with the exception of Brandt's government in the early 1970s, European socialist governments during these years failed to push 'social Europe' proposals in the Council. During the second half of the 1970s, for instance, EC governments (including socialist-led governments) abandoned their previous commitment to draft a second SAP. By the time the socialists came to power in France and put new proposals for a 'social Europe' on the table, the left had lost its Council majority; Mitterrand's proposals were politely ignored – including by Schmidt, who had never embraced his predecessor's 'social union' project. The need to ensure unanimity in the Council certainly stood in the way of progress towards a market-disciplining, redistributive Europe. But had the German, UK, and French governments pushed with determination for a 'social' agenda during the late 1970s and early 1980s, things might have taken another direction.

Finally, a key reason for the defeat of 'social Europe' was the inability of the European left to generate transnational grassroots mobilisation in support of radical change at European level. Such mobilisation would have been necessary to invert the balance of power in favour of labour amidst debates over European governance. It is significant that aside from a gathering under the Eiffel Tower a few days before the first elections to the EP, socialist parties never even considered mobilising activists in favour of their European project in those years. Throughout the long 1970s, European policy remained a party-leader matter, and only a marginal concern for those in the middle and lower echelons of socialist parties. Moreover, the left's failure to integrate new social movements, combined with a gradual decline in its working-class support from the 1980s onwards, would ultimately render remote the prospects for popular mobilisation in favour of an alternative Europe.

Things were a little different on the trade union front, where there was a real intent to build a transnational workers' movement to support a 'social Europe' project during the late 1970s and early 1980s. For instance, the European Action Day and Action Week organised in 1978 and 1979 by the ETUC, which saw the participation of millions of workers throughout Europe, marked a particularly incisive phase of

activism for the European trade unions movement. Yet, the proposal to organise a coordinated strike across Europe was rejected by a majority of unions in the ETUC Executive Committee for this occasion,¹³ and the ETUC remained unable to truly connect with national trade unions and inform and mobilise workers in support of one of its main European struggles: the Vredeling Directive.¹⁴

In short, the European left never succeeded in building the united, strategic and combative bloc that would have been needed to impose an alternative Europe.

Conclusion

This failure of the European left to build a ‘social’ – or socialist – Europe during the long 1970s holds lessons for today’s left. On one hand, it suggests the need for a fair degree of pessimism about the possibility of ever turning the EU into an instrument of social, democratic and ecological progress. It is worth emphasising that in the long 1970s the balance of power was much more favourable to labour and to the left than it is today, and the framework of European socio-economic governance more malleable. With twenty-seven member states sitting at the Council table today, and governments presently shifting right and far-right across the continent, ‘social Europe’ seems less and less possible. If the recent crises have indeed opened tiny breaches in the ‘Maastricht consensus’, they are far from sufficient to reverse the trend, and conservative forces are already busy reasserting austerity. A case in point: the European Commission presented its ‘reform plan’ of the Stability Pact a few months ago, which behind the smokescreen of ‘greater flexibility’ reinforces sanctions against poor performers.

At the same time, this failure enjoins the European left that still believes the EU can be changed – or perhaps supplanted by another type of European cooperation – to work relentlessly to overcome its own internal divisions and strategic weaknesses. One may think there are reasons to be optimistic today, as social democratic, green and radical left parties, trade unions, and civil society are now better organised at a European level, people are now more attentive to European politics, and the climate crisis is creating impetus for transnational mobilisation. However, to achieve a real re-direction of the European project, the left would have to build a genuinely transnational hegemonic bloc clearly opposed to the neoliberal and conservative ones, agree on a common programme for a social, ecological, and democratic Europe oriented towards workers’ interests, and launch an offensive based on mass popular support. The road to success runs uphill, and it is a steep and rocky hill at that.

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Notes

- 1 Julia Cagé et al., ‘Du verrou au levier’, *Le Grand Continent* (blog), April 2023, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2023/04/06/du-verrou-au-levier/>.
- 2 For instance, in Hubert Bouchet, ‘L’Arlésienne du social’, *Le Monde diplomatique*, July 1996, <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/1996/07/BOUCHET/5636>.
- 3 François Denord and Antoine Schwartz, *L’Europe sociale n’aura pas lieu*, Paris, Raisons d’agir, 2009.
- 4 Wolfram Kaiser, *Christian Democracy and the Origins of European Union*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- 5 The European Community (also often referred to as the European Communities), initially formed by six European member countries (France, Italy, West Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg), consisted of three international organisations – the European Coal and Steel Community, the European Economic Community (often referred to as the ‘Common Market’), and the European Community of Atomic Energy. They were eventually incorporated into the European Union in 1993.
- 6 The terms ‘European socialists’ and ‘European social democrats’ are used here as quasi-synonyms when referring to the parties in western Europe that adhered to the Socialist International, the CSPEC, and the Socialist Group of the European Parliament.
- 7 See for instance Christian Salm, *Transnational Socialist Networks in the 1970s: European Community Development Aid and Southern Enlargement*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016; Christophe Degryse and Pierre Tilly, *1973–2013: 40 Years of History of the European Trade Union Confederation*, Brussels, ETUI, 2013; Maud Bracke, ‘From the Atlantic to the Urals? Italian and French Communism and the Question of Europe, 1956–1973’, *Journal of European Integration History* 13, no. 2, 2007, pp33-53.
- 8 Fritz Scharpf, ‘The Asymmetry of European Integration, or Why the EU Cannot Be a “Social Market Economy”’, *Socio-Economic Review* 8, no. 2, 2010, pp211-50.
- 9 See Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1990.
- 10 See Erin Delaney, ‘The Labour Party’s Changing Relationship to Europe: The

Expansion of European Social Policy', *Journal of European Integration History* 8, January 2002, pp121-38.

- 11 See also Michele Di Donato, 'The Cold War and Socialist Identity: The Socialist International and the Italian "Communist Question" in the 1970s', *Contemporary European History* 24, no. 2, May 2015, pp193-211.
- 12 Sylvain Laurens, *Lobbyists and Bureaucrats in Brussels: Capitalism's Brokers*, Abingdon; New York, Routledge, 2017; Svein S. Andersen and Kjell A. Eliassen, 'European Community Lobbying', *European Journal of Political Research* 20, no. 2, 1991, pp173-87; Sonia Mazey and Jeremy Richardson, eds., *Lobbying in the European Community*, Oxford; New York, Oxford University Press, 1993.
- 13 AFO, box CES-1/4, 'Circulaire : Semaine d'action européenne 24-30 novembre 1979', 6 November 1979. FO had advocated a one-hour work stoppage throughout Europe, but the proposal did not win majority support.
- 14 IISH, ETUC-2202, 'Hush! Don't Tell the Workers', *Agenor*, 90, May-June 1983. See also Petrini, 'Demanding Democracy in the Workplace'.