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**British Trade Unions and European Monetary Issues (1970-2013)**

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European monetary initiatives have always been problematic and divisive for British trade unions—and for the British labour movement as a whole. Like the Labour Party, trade unions have found it difficult to adopt a consistent policy on these issues. This has been obvious from the late 1960s onwards, when the member states of the European Economic Community (EEC) started to work out plans to promote monetary integration and stability in Europe following the first signs of the collapse of the Bretton Woods System. Thus, the Barre Report (1969) and the Werner Report (1970) both called for a development of economic integration *and* monetary integration in Europe, even suggesting the creation of a single currency (in the 1980s), as far as the Werner Report was concerned. This means that trade unions had to define policies on these issues from the 1970s onwards. Surprisingly, their viewpoint depended on the development of European social policies from the late 1980s onwards, and trade unions increasingly used economic and monetary integration to promote progress in the social field.

This paper will consequently analyze and explain the evolution of the attitude of British trade unions towards these projects—the European Monetary System (EMS) and Economic and Monetary Union—between 1970 and 2013. It will also try to show how monetary issues and social initiatives have been linked and how they have been used by trade unions to defend their members' interests. Several scholars<sup>1</sup> have already insisted on the key role played by European social policies in the conversion of British trade unions to

Europe. Nevertheless, as far as this scholar is aware, there has been no detailed case study on the subject of monetary issues in the 1970-2013 period so far.

Since the trade union movement is quite diverse, this article will focus on the TUC and on the main trade unions affiliated to the confederation in the 1990s: the Amalgamated Engineering and Engineering Electrical Union (AEEU)<sup>2</sup>, the General Municipal and Boilermakers' Union (GMB)<sup>3</sup>, the Manufacturing, Science and Finance Union (MSF)<sup>4</sup>, the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU)<sup>5</sup> and the public services union (UNISON)<sup>6</sup>.

### *Negative Reactions to the First European Monetary Initiatives (1970-1983)*

In the 1970s and early 1980s the TUC and most of the main trade unions did not really support UK membership of the EEC. The union movement was divided into three camps: 'anti-European', 'pragmatic' and 'pro-European'. More precisely, the TUC wavered between a 'wait and see' policy – under the influence of the 'pragmatic' faction (1970-1972) – and opposition to EEC membership when the anti-Europeans dominated the debate (1972-1976). Between 1976 and 1979, the TUC adopted a more conciliatory approach taking the results of the 1975 referendum about Britain's EEC membership into account<sup>7</sup>.

The 1970s were also characterized by strong opposition by the British union movement to the European monetary projects, even though the policy of the TUC and the trade unions was not always well defined. The main arguments used by the union movement were that these initiatives would imply a loss of sovereignty and control for Britain. Thus, in 1970 the General Council of the TUC explained that if Britain was part of a monetary union: it would be more difficult to achieve full employment and ensure Britain's competitiveness, since devaluing the pound would no longer be possible to make British exports more attractive; it would also imply a 'unified federal state' which would threaten British sovereignty<sup>8</sup>. Regarding the EMS, the system based on fixed but adjustable exchange rates, which was to be established in 1979, the TUC leadership was sceptical. It admitted that greater monetary stability should be supported in Europe, but it feared that this scheme might be dominated by strong currencies and place excessive strains on the countries with weaker currencies<sup>9</sup>.

This viewpoint was shared by most trade unions, which were anti-European unions at the time. They considered that any attempt to involve Britain in an economic and monetary union would be detrimental to democratic institutions and would weaken the country, which would not have full control of its economy any longer<sup>10</sup>. The same arguments explained their hostility to the EMS, as Moss Evans, General Secretary of the TGWU, and Clive Jenkins, ASTMS General Secretary, made clear in a joint press statement in late 1978, considering such projects would 'reduce our capacity to manage our own national affairs'<sup>11</sup>. They were even more critical than the TUC leadership, considering that joining the EMS would 'transfer powers of the UK Government to external governments and their bankers by exposing sterling to speculation in a dangerous way'<sup>12</sup>. This was open to controversy. Obviously, joining the EMS meant a transfer of powers and a loss of control over monetary policy, but it was also supposed to put an end to speculation. Some aspects of their policy consequently seemed rather inconsistent. In fact, the only trade unions which supported European monetary initiatives between 1970 and 1979 were the GMWU and APEX, two leading proponents of the EEC. Not only did they favour economic and monetary union, 'even if this theme of policy was very low down the union's list of priorities'<sup>13</sup>, but they also encouraged the British government to join the EMS, particularly to ensure that Britain would not lose influence within the EEC<sup>14</sup>.

Between 1979 and 1983 the trade union movement became mostly anti-European, hence hostile to European monetary initiatives, because of the Alternative Economic Strategy (AES), which will be described later on, and the dominance of the anti-European camp within the movement. Consequently, in the early 1980s the TUC, *i.e.*, the majority of trade unions affiliated to the TUC, including the GMWU, called for Britain's withdrawal<sup>15</sup>. Nevertheless, there were a few dissenting voices and some unions, like the EETPU, APEX, COHSE or NALGO, encouraged the TUC to follow a more positive and constructive policy. They particularly stressed the importance of their involvement in the EEC and their relations with other European trade unions<sup>16</sup>. Likewise, the General Council of the TUC took a pragmatic position, preferring to suggest reforms to some of the EEC developments, such as the Common Agricultural Policy or the EEC Budget, rather than campaign for Britain's withdrawal<sup>17</sup>. In fact, the policy adopted by the TUC leadership was rather paradoxical at the time, since it supported the AES *and* EEC membership, including EMS membership. The EMS issue was not raised during the TUC debates, but it

was referred to in several documents. In *The Battle for Jobs*, for example, the General Council advocated improved coordination of the international monetary system as well as the re-imposition of exchange controls – which had been abolished by the Conservatives in 1979 – to ensure greater monetary and exchange rate stability. The support of the General Council was very cautious and conditional but it clearly considered the EMS as ‘one of the few sources of stability in an unstable world’<sup>18</sup>. Supporting Britain joining the EMS, even reluctantly, was quite ‘avant gardist’ since the Labour Party was against it at that time.

### *A Policy Review including a Cautious Attitude towards European Issues (1983-1988)*

Following the 1983 General Election the whole labour movement – the Labour Party and trade unions – went through a policy review to understand the reasons for their defeat, to modernize and to turn the Labour Party into a more attractive party. Like the Labour Party, trade unions were aware that their traditional left-wing policies were no longer supported by most trade union members<sup>19</sup>. Furthermore, trade union membership had fallen from 12 million in 1979 to 10.5 million in 1983, a decline which was explained by the anti-trade union legislation of the Thatcher government and by several economic changes: the rise in unemployment, the decline in the manufacturing sector and the expansion of a less unionized service industry, an increase in part-time employment and self-employment and a rise in women’s employment, insofar as women were less unionized than men<sup>20</sup>.

Consequently, trade unions leaders – encouraged by TUC General Secretary Len Murray (between 1973 and 1984) who called for ‘a new mood of realism’ among unions to represent better the interests of their members – decided to support more realistic and pragmatic policies. Concerning Europe and European monetary initiatives, this meant that trade union leaders would no longer mention these issues so as to give Labour some leeway and to allow them to evolve towards a more pro-European position – the Labour Party was indeed aware that it now had to accept EEC entry<sup>21</sup>. Between 1984 and 1987 there were no TUC debates on the EEC and no resolutions were submitted on this issue:

The reason for this was a simple one. No formal reversal of policy had taken place within the major unions’ conferences and, had the argument over the EEC been taken to a vote at the Party Conference or TUC Congress, the mandates pointed to the same decision as in 1981. There was now virtually a consensus at Leadership level that such a decision would

be very damaging. Most Leftwing union leaders moved discreetly in line with the rest of the union leadership in attempting to give the Parliamentary leadership room for manoeuvre.<sup>22</sup>

Despite this silence to prevent trade unions from calling for Britain's withdrawal, the trade union leadership tried to evolve. Under the influence of Norman Willis, the new General Secretary (1984-1993), the TUC leadership slowly became more favourable to European integration, highlighting the problems and opportunities arising from membership<sup>23</sup>. Some trade union leaders also started to review their policies towards the EEC and to convert their membership: the GMWU (from 1984 onwards) and the AUEW (from 1985 onwards) gradually abandoned their opposition to the EEC, without really adopting a well-defined policy towards Europe or European monetary issues because of the persistent hostility of the rank and file<sup>24</sup>. As far as APEX, the EETPU or NALGO were concerned, they continued to support EEC membership but monetary issues were not alluded to<sup>25</sup>.

### *The Impact of 'Social Europe' (1988-1992)*

If trade unions had started to review their policies towards Europe in the early 1980s, it was really in the late 1980s that this change was obvious, because of the emphasis on 'Social Europe', *i.e.*, the development of European social initiatives which enabled British trade unions to protect their members following Margaret Thatcher's anti-union laws. The 1988 TUC Conference marked the public conversion. First, the delegates gave a standing ovation to Jacques Delors, the President of the European Commission, who had delivered a speech showing unions that Europe could be a way to influence economic and social policies at home and to ensure a better protection for the rights of their members<sup>26</sup>. Second, the TUC published a report entitled 'Maximising the Benefits, Minimising the Costs' which insisted on the significance of the 1992 European single market—highlighting the role trade unions should play in this process and the need for a balanced economic and social development<sup>27</sup>. Third, the delegates agreed to carry a composite motion calling for a campaign to 'raise awareness of the dangers and opportunities' presented by the 1992 European programme<sup>28</sup>. One should not forget that this was a huge step forward since Europe had not been mentioned during TUC debates since 1984.

Europe was now considered as a way to improve the living and working conditions of British people. Most of the main trade unions, like the GMWU/GMB, the AEU or APEX, also evolved and became more positive to Europe thanks to the Jacques Delors speech<sup>29</sup>. Others, such as the TGWU or MSF, found it more difficult to change their policy because of the anti-European views of their rank and file—even though the leadership tried to make them change their minds<sup>30</sup>.

This change in attitude was reflected in the policy followed by the trade union movement towards European monetary issues some time later, in 1989, following the European Summit, which had approved the Delors Committee Report on Economic and Monetary Union. A TGWU official made it clear in a 2003 interview: ‘Our policy change [on European monetary questions] coincided with the Jacques Delors “charm offensive” against traditionally Eurosceptic trade unions and the more positive approach to EC membership of the Kinnock-led Labour Party’<sup>31</sup>.

Thus, the TUC leadership and most trade unions (GMB, the AEU and the TGWU) adopted a more positive policy to the ERM, which was now considered as a way to ease Britain’s economic difficulties<sup>32</sup>. They insisted on several key advantages in Britain joining the ERM of the EMS: it would benefit British trade by removing exchange rate instability, it would make it easier to cut interest rates since the government’s long term priority would be to ‘achieve convergence towards the European Community average inflation rate’, it would end speculative pressure on the pound and make it easier for companies to plan investment ahead<sup>33</sup>. The support of the trade union movement was not unconditional though. Trade unions were, for example, aware that Britain would no longer be able to devalue the pound to help British industry be more competitive once it had decided to join the ERM. The TUC General Council also insisted that adhering to the ERM should be accompanied by ‘an equal degree of commitment to economic policy cooperation as well as monetary cooperation between the EC Governments, including a strong European regional policy’<sup>34</sup>. Furthermore, it called for a competitive exchange rate to help British exports<sup>35</sup>. As far as MSF and NALGO were concerned, they remained more cautious, even critical, because of the impact ERM entry would have on the ability of national governments to follow their own economic and monetary policies<sup>36</sup>.

Concerning economic and monetary union, which now seemed to become a reality, the change of the trade union movement was even more striking since it had been mostly

opposed to this scheme so far. In 1989 the General Council of the TUC seemed quite positive, considering the Delors report 'as a major landmark in the debate on economic and monetary union and [accepting] that many of the changes it outlined could work to the benefit of workers in Britain and Europe'<sup>37</sup>. The major trade unions remained more cautious and at first found it difficult to follow clear-cut policies. The AEU and GMB were the trade unions which were the most enthusiastic at that time, supporting the scheme and highlighting its economic and political advantages: EMU would cut out the cost of changing currencies, enable industry to operate in a more stable environment thanks to the removal of currency risks, enable the harmonization of interest rates and make it easier to compare living standards and production costs in the EC, prevent the isolation of Britain in the EC since the UK would be able influence future decisions about its implementation<sup>38</sup>. Surprisingly, the TGWU also became more constructive, if somewhat critical<sup>39</sup>. MSF and NALGO were the most cautious trade unions once again, remaining vague but insisting on several issues for discussion: the impact EMU would have on wage bargaining, the question of the accountability of the new institutions, the loss of control they would imply and the impact EMU would have on the weaker economies so as to maintain economic and social cohesion within the EC<sup>40</sup>.

Even if the TUC, the AEEU and GMB were quite positive, and the TGWU more constructive, their support was not unconditional. First, they criticized the emphasis on monetary, rather than economic, union, hence the priority given to the achievement of price stability, considering that full employment should be the primary concern. Second, they were worried about the independence of the European Central Bank (ECB), which was to be created in 1994. Since the ECB would operate outside the control of member governments, which would imply a loss of sovereignty and control over monetary policy, the trade unions insisted on the need for adequate safeguards for full democratic accountability<sup>41</sup>. Third, the trade unions were concerned about the impact of monetary union on the living and working conditions of trade union members and started to insist that progress on monetary union should be matched by progress within the social dimension<sup>42</sup>. Pay bargaining was a rather sensitive issue at the time. Indeed, trade unions considered that EMU would lead to a substantial rise in the pressure to stop labour costs increasing faster in Britain. Consequently, British employers would try to decrease wages

because the government would no longer be able to devalue the pound against other European currencies to protect competitiveness<sup>43</sup>.

In 1992 the trade union movement had clearly understood that EMU and social issues were linked – this change in attitude resulted from reorientations which began in the early 1980s. At first, trade unions only insisted on the importance of the social dimension and social rights, but later they tried to be more precise and insisted on the social rights workers could get from Europe if they supported its initiatives, including its monetary schemes.

### *The Maastricht Treaty: Trade Unions Divided on EMU (1992-1997)*

‘Social Europe’ had made trade unions change their minds about European monetary issues even if their policy was not always well-defined and their support was not unconditional. The Maastricht debates compelled them to adopt a clear-cut position and to clearly express their views on these issues. This enabled them to scrutinize the impact of the Treaty, which led to some surprising reactions and to tensions within the trade union movement.

First, if all the trade unions (and the TUC) criticized the opt-out on the social chapter that had been negotiated by the Major government, not all of them had the same attitude towards EMU, partly because of the rank and file, which was more hostile to this project than the leadership. Thus, the TUC General Council rejected the opt-clause which had been negotiated by the Major government concerning Britain’s participation in the third stage of EMU, and continued to follow the same policy as that defined since 1988 and as that of the Labour Party. In a publication entitled *Unions after Maastricht*, the TUC leadership explained, for example, that not joining EMU would not be in the national interest, because Britain would be isolated within the EU and would not be able to influence the creation of the future European single currency<sup>44</sup>. This view was shared by the AEEU and GMB<sup>45</sup>.

On the contrary, the other trade unions (MSF, NALGO and the TGWU) decided to support the opt-out from the single currency. Two main concerns appeared in the papers published by these trade unions: the convergence criteria, which had just been defined, and the ECB, a recurring criticism. Their first concern about the convergence criteria, which had to be met by the member states wishing to participate in the third stage of



EMU, could be explained by the priority they gave to 'monetarism'. One should not forget that the Maastricht convergence criteria imposed control over price stability, government finances, exchange rate stability and the convergence of interest rates. Trade unions consequently feared that such criteria would be deflationary—leading to cuts in public spending and rising unemployment—and called for new 'criteria for real economic convergence', ensuring full employment and putting an end to inequalities in the EU. Trade unions were all the more worried since Europe was hit by recession and a rise in unemployment in the early 1990s<sup>46</sup>. The second concern about the ECB resulted from the lack of democratic control it implied<sup>47</sup>.

NALGO, the public services union, was the most vehement at the time, since it decided to reject the Maastricht Treaty as a whole, insisting that it would threaten workers' rights and lead to cuts in public spending, cutbacks in wages and public services and a rise in unemployment<sup>48</sup>. The fear concerning welfare cuts was explained by the fixed exchange rate—implied by monetary union—but also by the Maastricht convergence criteria<sup>49</sup>. When UNISON, the new public services union, was created in 1993, following the merger between NALGO, COHSE and NUPE, it remained hostile to the Maastricht Treaty—some of its branches were strongly opposed to it<sup>50</sup>. Nevertheless, the leadership tried to have a more qualified attitude so as to reflect the views of the three former trade unions—COHSE and NUPE had been more pragmatic towards the Maastricht Treaty than NALGO<sup>51</sup>. At the 1995 National Conference the UNISON National Executive Council submitted a motion recognizing the increasing importance of European economic developments as well as the European social initiatives even if continued to criticize the 'inflexible, deflationary convergence criteria and public spending limits set out in the Maastricht Treaty'<sup>52</sup>.

In the mid-1990s, the trade union movement was still divided on the single currency. The 'critical camp', *i.e.*, the TGWU and UNISON, remained rather opposed to this project, mainly because of the impact EMU, and the Maastricht criteria, could have on British jobs and public expenditure<sup>53</sup>. The 'pro-EMU camp', including the AEEU, GMB and—also progressively, but very cautiously—MSF, took a more positive approach to this issue and increasingly supported the TUC policy, insisting that EMU could end financial speculation and be a way to ensure Britain's influence in the EU<sup>54</sup>. Regarding the TUC leadership, it clearly became the most favourable to joining the euro in the trade union

movement thanks to John Monks, the new pro-European General Secretary (1993-2003). Its support was motivated by the fear that Britain would be excluded from a major European decision-making centre if it did not join EMU, by the willingness to benefit from European social policies and by a comprehensive review of the advantages and drawbacks of monetary union<sup>55</sup>. In early 1997 the TUC leadership even called for early entry—in January 1999, with the first ‘wave’ of member states—and criticized the ‘wait and see’ attitude characterizing the British debate over EMU<sup>56</sup>. At the 1996 TUC Conference most of the trade unions affiliated to the TUC also favoured Britain joining EMU<sup>57</sup>.

### ***EMU as a Driver to Promote Social Policies (1992-1997)***

The Maastricht debates had allowed trade unions to be fully aware of the implications of EMU and of the Maastricht convergence criteria. Consequently, from the 1990s onwards the TUC and the main British trade unions increasingly insisted that progress towards EMU should be accompanied by European action to promote growth and employment<sup>58</sup>. They also decided to call for social policies at the national and at the European levels because of the economic difficulties Britain and European countries were facing at the time. Monetary union was clearly considered as a key element in strategies for national recovery<sup>59</sup>.

At the European level, the trade union movement used different means to insist on the need for such policies. In 1993, for example, the TUC tried to work with the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), campaigning for a programme for growth, jobs and competitiveness which included the enforcement of *real* convergence criteria—instead of *monetarist* ones<sup>60</sup>. The TUC also supported the European policies in favour of job creation, like the commitment to an EC growth and employment strategy decision made at the Copenhagen Summit of 1993 or the Swedish proposal for an Employment Chapter in the Maastricht Treaty in 1996<sup>61</sup>. Like the TUC, the other trade unions endorsed these initiatives, particularly the Delors plan to promote growth and Employment in Europe<sup>62</sup>. GMB and the AEEU even encouraged European trade unions to work together to protect the social rights of their members following the ‘important business and political decision [which were] taken at European level’<sup>63</sup>.

The trade union movement was all the more motivated to promote such policies as they complained about the ‘negative and isolationist’ attitude of the Conservative

governments, which had decided to opt out from the Social Chapter and which had tried to block the passage of several directives, such as that dealing with the rights of part time workers, at the European level<sup>64</sup>. Trade unions also criticized their domestic economic policies consisting in 'labour market deregulation, privatization, and attacks on public services' and refusing to consult trade unions about ways of ensuring employment<sup>65</sup>.

At the national level, they consequently all called for a new domestic economic strategy, which should be run in parallel with the European one. In its 1993 'Unified Budget Submission', the TUC leadership suggested such a strategy should be aimed at targeting growth and investment to achieve full employment, at giving priority to investment and training to improve public finances and at restoring industrial competitiveness, particularly that of British industry<sup>66</sup>. Most of the main trade unions (the AEEU, GMB, MSF and the TGWU) also decided to focus on the British manufacturing industry, which had suffered—since the 1970s—from the market forces policies of the Thatcher and Major governments and the subsequent recession. And so they called for a national industrial strategy based on a rise in investment, an increase in R&D funding and on a well-trained workforce so as to ensure a productive and innovative British industry<sup>67</sup>. As far as NALGO was concerned, it logically continued to defend the interests of public sector workers. Calling for policies aimed at modernizing and improving public services was its key priority<sup>68</sup>.

### *A Support to EMU Depending on an Enhanced Social Dimension? (1997-2002)*

The 1997-2002 period was the time when British trade unions were the most enthusiastic about joining the euro. First, they were encouraged by Tony Blair's landslide victory at the 1997 General Election. Blair had indeed promised to adopt a more positive discourse on Europe and the euro than the Tories if Labour were elected. Second, trade unions called for a weaker currency, *i.e.*, the euro, instead of the strong pound, which had a negative impact on the British export industries. In the meantime, the trade union movement continued to promote policies for growth and jobs in the EU.

What was obvious between 1997 and 2002 was that the British trade union movement tried to lead the way on the euro. This appeared clearly once the Blair government had announced in October 1997 that Britain was unlikely to join the single currency with the first wave of member states and would instead 'prepare and decide' to

have the option of joining in the next Parliament<sup>69</sup>. The TUC quickly organized a series of regional seminars across the UK, a special conference entitled 'Unions and the Euro' on 13 May 1999 and published several documents to make trade unionists, local business and representatives from the voluntary and public sector aware of the implications of the euro<sup>70</sup>. The TUC really wanted to encourage public debate on EMU and to induce the Blair government to join the single currency as soon as possible: 'An indefinite abstention from the euro risks history repeating itself... I want Congress to help create the conditions which will encourage the government to go forward'<sup>71</sup>. The motivation to change attitudes towards the single currency was shared by GMB and the AEEU, as exemplified by AEEU General Secretary Ken Jackson as early as 1997: 'As trades unions who led the way in 1988, we should have the courage once again to lead the way on single currency'<sup>72</sup>.

From 1998 onwards, GMB and the AEEU (the leadership as well as the grassroots) both encouraged the Blair government to join the euro as soon as possible<sup>73</sup>. From 1999 onwards MSF also called for euro entry and this commitment was reinforced once MSF merged with the AEEU in 2002—despite the persistent hostility to the single currency noticeable in some of MSF branches<sup>74</sup>.

Like the TUC, the AEEU, GMB and MSF still expressed reservations, though. They particularly kept on insisting on an enhanced social dimension because of the 'monetarist' nature of the convergence criteria and the high unemployment rate that affected European countries at the time<sup>75</sup>. In 1999 the TUC leadership even stated that they would not campaign for euro entry—if a referendum was held—unless the Labour government confirmed its commitment to the European social dimension<sup>76</sup>. Not only were the European social initiatives considered as a way to improve the conditions of British workers, but also as means to get the support of the British for the single currency: 'Winning popular support for the single currency will need an active social policy at European level'<sup>77</sup>. In 2000 similar ideas were promoted by a group called 'the Trade Unionists for Europe' (TUfE), which included big trade unions like the AEEU or GMB. These trade unions kept on supporting the new European social policies, which were implemented at the time, like the Employment Chapter included in the Amsterdam Treaty (1999) or the Employment Pact approved by the European Council in Cologne (1999)<sup>78</sup>.

Concerning the TGWU and UNISON, they insisted all the more on the social dimension as they made it quite clear that they would not support euro entry unless the

conditions defined by the Labour government ('the five tests') were met and measures were taken to protect jobs and public services<sup>79</sup>. Since they still considered that EMU would be detrimental to the public sector—because of the convergence criteria as well as the EU Growth and Stability Pact—they encouraged the government to strengthen the European social dimension and called for a 'reflationary package' to counteract the effects of the Maastricht criteria<sup>80</sup>. More precisely, they endorsed European social policies, such as the Employment Chapter or Jacques Santer's Confidence Pact for Employment<sup>81</sup>.

Between the early 1980s and 2002 the trade union movement had evolved from a cautious position to a mostly enthusiastic attitude towards European monetary issues. In the late 1990s most trade unions encouraged the Blair government to join the euro. 'Social Europe' seemed to have played a key part in this conversion but to what extent? Which factors could account for such a change?

### *Reasons for the Change in Attitude towards European Monetary Issues (1980-2002)*

Five main factors could explain the conversion of the trade union movement. First, trade unions had gradually become aware that policies such as the Alternative Economic Strategy (AES) were no longer possible. The AES, which had become quite popular within the labour movement as a whole in the 1970s, was aimed at promoting socialism in Britain<sup>82</sup>. It was even intended 'as the outline of the economic programme which would be pursued by a future left Labour government'<sup>83</sup>. The AES was based on the following key elements: a massive expansion in demand so as to restore full employment and encourage investment; inflation control measures; greater public ownership; control on international trade and capital movements to protect the balance of payments and put an end to the flight of capital; devaluation of the pound to restore Britain's competitiveness; and withdrawal from the Common Market to ensure Britain's control over its economic policy<sup>84</sup>. As shown by the last element, promoting the AES meant that Britain could not support EEC initiatives, which explains why most trade unions were anti-European unions in the late 1970s. Nevertheless, in the mid-1980s it became obvious for the labour movement that globalization and the interdependence of economies made the implementation of the AES quite difficult. Not only did several criticisms of the AES emerge within the labour movement but the failure of the socialist experiment of the Mitterrand government in France—which had tried to implement a national expansion

strategy, close to the AES—also stressed the need for a change<sup>85</sup>. Consequently, from the late 1980s onwards, the trade union movement decided to support more outward-looking strategies, particularly European economic strategies, which included support to ERM/economic and monetary union, as exemplified by the TUC General Council: ‘A new approach in the 1990s will have to reflect changed circumstances, above all the influence of European developments. It will, quite simply, be impossible in the long run to successfully conduct economic policy in isolation from the move towards greater economic and monetary union within Europe’<sup>86</sup>.

Second, the conversion of trade unions to European monetary initiatives had been encouraged by the similar evolution of the Labour Party on these issues. The change initiated in 1983 had become obvious in the early 1990s. The Labour Party now favoured Britain joining the ERM if the following conditions were met: ‘entry at an effective exchange rate, adequate central bank swap arrangements to tackle speculative attacks, increased support for regional policy, and agreements on a strategy for growth’<sup>87</sup>. It also supported economic and monetary union even if it insisted, for example, that: ‘any new System of European Central Banks should be politically accountable, there should be a substantial degree of convergence in the economies of the member states and convergence should be assisted by regional policy to help the weaker regions’<sup>88</sup>. Most of the conditions defined by the Labour Party were similar to those supported by pro-European unions at the time.

Third, trade unions had been able to evolve on European monetary issues thanks to the influence of their leadership and of the TUC General Council. The latter had done their best to limit dissent, to exclude some positions from the agenda and to control the compositing process of their conferences<sup>89</sup>. Indeed, as already shown, the trade union movement was not united on these issues. There were many inter- and intra-union divisions. The Maastricht debates made these intra-union tensions obvious insofar as the documents published/the decisions taken by the leadership of some trade unions, such as GMB or MSF, on European monetary issues did not always reflect the viewpoint of their rank and file. This was exemplified by the motions submitted by some branches during conferences or the articles written by several branch members<sup>90</sup>. It was still noticeable in the early twenty-first century. Thus, GMB seemed to have put pressure on its members to support euro entry. According to an article published by *The Morning Star* in June 2001, the

trade union executive had committed GMB to such a policy without organizing a full debate on this issue, as requested by its members<sup>91</sup>.

Concerning the inter-union tensions, they were obvious at the TUC level, during debates and during the composite process. Nevertheless, the TUC leadership, supported by the leadership of some unions, always tried to reach a consensus. According to the majority of views, this could lead to a positive or a qualified attitude towards European monetary issues. In the late 1990s the TUC leadership clearly encouraged trade unions to take a positive attitude towards the euro. And so, at the 1998 Congress, the final composite motion about EMU was less negative than the motions moved by the Community and Youth Workers' Union (CYWU) and seconded by the Institute of Professionals, Managers and Specialists (IPMS)<sup>92</sup>.

The next two factors concern the general evolution of trade unions towards European issues. Indeed, as already mentioned, trade unions had tried to react to the numerous anti-union laws which had been passed by the Thatcher governments between 1979 and 1990 and which had weakened their position. In the early 1990s trade unions were less influential than ever before and had to comply with a great number of rules following the Employment Acts (1980, 1982, 1988, 1989, 1990) and the 1984 Trade Union Act which had outlawed several practices, such as secondary picketing, sympathetic strikes, post-entry closed shops or pre-entry closed shops, which had made union funds liable to action for damages in the case of unlawful acts or made secret ballots compulsory in trade union election and prior to any strike. One should also note that the Conservative governments had encouraged a neo-liberal industrial relations system, in which employers and unions were not considered as social partners, *i.e.*, there was no legal framework for employee representation<sup>93</sup>. Consequently, trade unions decided to embrace Europe to make their voices heard, to deliver improved conditions for British workers and to regain the influence they had lost at the national level:

A concerted campaign for the social dimension to be implemented could well restore some of the trade union rights that the Government has denied us over the last nine years. It is time for reluctant Europeans to look again at the EEC and realise that, while it is far from perfect in every respect, it offers the first tangible hope for the improvement of working rights and social provisions in Britain since 1979.<sup>94</sup>

This was all the more interesting to trade unions since EU laws could not be repealed or weakened by any Conservative governments.

Finally, trade unions had been much attracted to the European social and employment policies that had been approved in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly because of Margaret Thatcher's anti-union legislation. The Single European Act signed in 1986 had relaunched the idea of implementing social policies at the European level. This had first led to rather weak initiatives, with the signing of the Social Charter and the promotion of social dialogue in 1989. Nevertheless, the Maastricht Treaty had given a new impulse to the social dimension by extending the EC competences in the social field and by proposing a radical change in the community legislative process for social policy thanks to the Social Policy Protocol annexed to the Treaty. The Protocol, which Britain had refused to sign, stated that 11 of the 12 member states could adopt policies on employment and industrial relations, suggesting 'a constitutionally recognised role for the social partners in the community legislative process' and allowing for qualified majority voting regarding some of the new competences in employment and industrial relations<sup>95</sup>.

These new procedures aroused all the more the interest of British trade unions since the Conservative governments were opposed to them. In the 1990s, the promotion of European employment strategies even reinforced the belief of trade unions in 'Social Europe', particularly as the UK faced a high unemployment rate at that time. Consequently, trade unions increasingly decided to bring to the fore this social dimension, using European monetary issues to promote European social policies and increasingly linking these two issues. Was it still noticeable between 2002 and 2013?

### *More Cautious Attitudes since 2002 (2002-2013)*

Since 2002 British trade unions have been more silent, even cautious, towards European monetary issues and euro entry. On the one hand, the prospect of a referendum on Britain's membership has become more and more unlikely, particularly since June 2003 when the Blair government confirmed that Britain had still not complied with the five tests and would not join the single currency in the near future<sup>96</sup>. On the other hand, the election of new trade union leaders, like Derek Simpson (General Secretary of AMICUS between May 2004 and June 2007, Joint-General Secretary of Unite between July 2007 and



December 2010) or Paul Kenny (GMB General Secretary since 2005), has increased the influence of the Eurosceptic left within the trade union movement.

This change in attitude was exemplified by the 2002 and 2003 TUC debates when the TUC General Council had to qualify its position, *i.e.*, to accept that Britain joining the euro would be conditional, in order to reach a consensus on this issue. A clear gap could be noticed if we compared extracts from the 2000 and 2002 Composite motions (carried):

Congress believes [...] that to get the best out of Europe for the UK working population, the UK should join the European Single Currency if the economic conditions are right for Britain.<sup>97</sup>

Congress does not believe that the interests of manufacturing industry, public services and the trade union movement will be best served by a referendum on the European Single Currency unless a sustainable exchange rate between the pound and the euro is achieved; greater government support for the consolidation and expansion of the European Social Model is demonstrated; and assurances regarding any repercussions of entry on public expenditure are received.<sup>98</sup>

As mentioned in the 2002 Composite, support for entry depended on three conditions, even four conditions since passing the five tests also had to be taken into account. This was strengthened by the 2003 Composite, which also suggested that there should be a full review of the Stability and Growth Pact to increase employment and public expenditure<sup>99</sup>.

Since 2003 euro entry has never been mentioned in the TUC debates. It was never alluded to during the economic and financial crisis or during the euro crisis. Of course, this issue was raised to highlight the economic difficulties of some eurozone countries and to call for growth and employment strategies instead of the austerity policies that were followed in the eurozone<sup>100</sup>, but the prospect of Britain's membership was never referred to. Some trade unions tried to submit motions in favour of euro entry, though. Thus, at the 2009 GMB Annual Congress, a branch called for joining the euro at the earliest possible date in order to boost employment, investments and to create a more stable economic environment in Britain<sup>101</sup>. Nevertheless it was not carried, as was explained by the GMB leadership:

As the exchange rate has remained high since Congress 2009 [...], examination of the case for membership of the Euro is not realistic at this time. This, combined with continuing

economic and financial instability, and the fact that many EU members of the Eurozone are currently running deficits way above the Growth and Stability pact levels of 3% GDP, makes it very difficult to assess the impact on our members across all sections with any certainty or confidence. We continue to monitor the situation closely.<sup>102</sup>

Today, the main factors which can explain the silence of the trade union movement have been the euro crisis (since 2009) and the Eurosceptic attitude of the Cameron-Clegg government (since May 2010). Nevertheless, the social dimension has also played a key role in the growing Euroscepticism of the trade union movement, insofar as trade unions have been disappointed by the slow progress in this field. Thus, John Monks has complained about the lack of constructive policies of the governments (Labour and Conservative) over the past ten years, referring to the blocking of important social projects, like the extension of the Charter of Fundamental Rights to British Workers in 2007, which 'has not recreated support for the European project among British trade union leaders'<sup>103</sup>. He has also repeatedly stressed the importance of Social Europe, but trade unions seem to be quite aware of the need to fight for progress in this field. Three examples reflect this analysis. First, the TUC General Council has repeatedly stressed the importance of the European social dimension in documents as well as during the Annual Congress over the past few years<sup>104</sup>. In September 2013 it even called for a People's Plan for Europe aimed at improving the conditions of all European workers<sup>105</sup>. Second, the new Eurosceptic trade union leaders, such as Paul Kenny or Len McCluskey (General Secretary of Unite since 2011), have been more reluctant to endorse the EU on its present terms. They are not anti-European but they have insisted that they should get more from Europe and criticized the British governments which have refused progress in the social field and prevented British workers from getting the same rights as their European counterparts<sup>106</sup>. One should note that the same arguments have been repeated by Dave Prentis, Unison General Secretary. Third, in the context of David Cameron's promise to hold a referendum on Britain membership of the EU if re-elected in 2015, trade unions have brought to the fore the social rights provided by the EU so as to encourage British people to stay in the EU. The TUC made it quite clear that it was opposed to such a prospect, considering the referendum as a smokescreen for plans to tear up workers' rights—David Cameron

indeed demanded a repatriation of powers, particularly social and employment laws, from Brussels:

The [Cameron] government has already made it easier for employers to sack people they don't like and more difficult for workers to get justice before the courts. [...] But there's one set of workers' rights David Cameron can't touch. Those are the rights provided for by social Europe [...] The Prime Minister wants to 'repatriate' those rights, and not because he thinks he can improve them! David Cameron wants to make it easier for bad employers to undercut good ones, drive down wages, and make people who already work some of the longest hours in Europe work even longer.<sup>107</sup>

Some trade unions, like GMB, have been much more radical and do not even seem ready to vote in the referendum to stay in the EU if social benefits disappear:

Millions of UK workers bought into the EU ideal on the balance of a free business market for jobs that had a social dimension for equality, employment rights, health and safety protections, access to justice and for the free movement not the exploitation of labour. Let there be no misunderstanding that if the EU is only there for the needs of business without these social benefits that this is not the EU millions of workers in the UK would vote for in a referendum. [...] UK workers will not vote for a one way street EU where in terms of social benefits they are second class citizens.<sup>108</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

As shown in this paper, British trade unions made a U-turn regarding European monetary issues between 1970 and 2003. At first mostly hostile to these initiatives because of the loss of sovereignty and economic control they implied, trade unions gradually adopted a more favourable attitude and started to review their policies from the early 1980s onwards. The change was particularly obvious in the late 1980s when Jacques Delors made a speech at the 1988 TUC Conference, showing unions that Europe could be a way to influence economic and social policies. In the late 1990s the TUC and most of the trade unions affiliated to this body, like the AEEU, GMB and MSF, were in favour of Britain joining the euro and encouraged the Blair government to adhere to this scheme, even though their support was conditional and the trade union movement was still divided.

Several factors had made such a change possible from the mid-1980s onwards. First of all, it had become obvious that policies such as the AES could no longer be

implemented because of globalization and the interdependence of economies. Secondly, trade unions had followed the example of the Labour Party, which had introduced new and more favourable policies on European monetary issues from 1983 onwards. Thirdly, they had been encouraged to change their minds on such issues by their leaders, including the TUC leadership, who had done their best to limit dissent and exclude some positions from the agenda. Finally, they had been very interested in the development of economic and social policies at the EU level, particularly as the Conservative governments had been opposed to such a scheme.

In fact, 'Social Europe' was a key factor in the change of attitude of the trade union movement relative to European monetary issues insofar as the EU allowed British trade unions to protect their members following Margaret Thatcher's anti-union legislation. Today the European social dimension remains the cornerstone of the support of trade unions to Europe and European monetary issues – even if trade unions have become more silent on these issues. After David Cameron promised to hold an in/out referendum and to repatriate social and employment laws if the Tories were re-elected in 2015, trade unions insisted on the social rights provided by the EU, even claiming they would never support EU membership if social benefits disappeared. The outcome of the 2015 General Election will consequently be most important. Should the Conservatives win the next General Election the policy which has been observed by British trade unions towards Europe since the 1980s could be called into question.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For example:

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P. Whyman, 'British trade unions and EMU: Natural supporters or conflicting interests?' in Whyman, P., Baimbridge, M. & Burkitt, B. (Eds.) *Implications of the Euro. A critical perspective from the left*, London: Routledge, pp. 137-144.

<sup>2</sup> The AEEU was created in 1992 after the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) merged with the Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunication and Plumbing Union (EETPU). These two trade unions had already been the result of several mergers. For example, the AEU had its name changed in 1986 after the Technical, Administrative and Supervisory Section (TASS), with which it had merged in the 1970s, had decided to break its links with the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AUEW). In 1986 the AUEW thus had its name changed again to the AEU.

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- <sup>3</sup> The GMB results from a series of mergers, beginning in 1924 when the General and Municipal Workers Union (GMWU) was formed following the merger of several unions. Since 1924 there have been a great number of amalgamations including, for example, the General, Municipal, Boilermakers and Allied Trade Union (GMBATU) in 1982 or the Association of Professional, Executive, Clerical and Computer Staff (APEX) in 1989.
- <sup>4</sup> MSF was created in 1988 following a merger between the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs (ASTMS) and the Technical, Administrative and Supervisory Section (TASS). In the 1970s TASS had been part of the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AUEW) but it had decided to become an independent union in May 1986.
- <sup>5</sup> In 2007 the TGWU merged with AMICUS – which resulted mainly from the amalgamation of MSF and the AEEU in 2001 – to form Unite.
- <sup>6</sup> UNISON was formed in July 1993 when three public services unions decided to merge: the National and Local Government Officers Association (NALGO), the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) and the Confederation of Health Service Employees (COHSE).
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- <sup>11</sup> ASTMS, 'Joint "No" to Britain joining the EMS', *ASTMS Journal*, November/December 1978, p. 1.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> C. Berbéri, 'An interview with John Edmonds', 21 January 2003.
- <sup>14</sup> C. Berbéri, 'An interview with John Edmonds', 21 January 2003.
- C. Berbéri, 'An interview with Roy Grantham', 28 February 2003.
- <sup>15</sup> GMWU, *Annual Congress 1980 Decisions*, p. 6.
- P. Teague, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
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<sup>28</sup> TUC, *Annual Congress Report*, 1988, pp. 669-71.

<sup>29</sup> AEU, 'European Elections - 15<sup>th</sup> June', *AEU Journal*, June 1989, p. 21

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<sup>31</sup> C. Berbéri, 'An interview with a TGWU Official', 1<sup>st</sup> April 2003.

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GMB & UCW, *A New Agenda. Bargaining for Prosperity in the 1990s*, 1990, pp. 3-4.

TUC, *Budget Submission*, January 1990, pp. 14-5.

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<sup>35</sup> TUC, *Towards 2000: Managing the Economy*, August 1990, p. 8.

Surprisingly, when the Thatcher government joined the ERM in October 1990, trade unions reacted cautiously and did not endorse the decision enthusiastically. Three factors certainly accounted for this attitude: the too high exchange rate at which Britain had joined the ERM, the persistent skepticism of some trade unions towards this issue and the cautious position of the Labour Party.

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