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Kristine Mitchell
Dickinson College

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**From Whitehall to Brussels:
Thatcher, Delors and the Europeanization of the TUC**

Kristine Mitchell

Dickinson College

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Abstract

For decades one of Europe's most euroskeptic trade union confederations, between 1983 and 1988 the TUC fundamentally reversed its position on the European Community (EC). This article traces the dual impact of Thatcher's and Delors' policy activism on the TUC's European strategy during these heady years of reorientation, and explores subsequent developments during the 1990s as the TUC sought to recover from the Conservatives' domestic assault on the unions and to capitalize on the new opportunities emerging in Delors' Social Europe. Archival materials illustrate the TUC's increasing hostility towards the EC during the 1960s, 70s and 80s, while interviews within the TUC and the EU institutions highlight the evolution of the TUC's European strategy during the 1990s.

Europe has been engaged in an unprecedented experiment of economic and political integration for more than five decades now. For the first three of these, Britain's largest organized labor group, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) maintained a stance that ranged from aloof, to critical, to openly hostile. In the past twenty years, however, the position of the TUC towards European integration and the European Community (the term used until 1993 for the entity we now know as the European Union, or EU)¹ has changed radically. This reorientation of the TUC towards the European Community (EC) in the late 1980s represented a major ideological and policy shift within the British trade union movement and the British Left more broadly, and is significant for two major reasons. First, it marked a sea change within the British labor movement. The TUC is an umbrella labor organization which, over the course of the post-war period has affiliated from 75 to 90 percent of all trade union membership in the UK. In terms of the sheer number of workers represented (ranging from 6.5 million in 1945, to a high of more than 12 million in 1979-80),² the TUC's membership far outstripped virtually every other union confederation in Western Europe.³ While not all of the TUC's member unions equally supported (or today support) the European project, the TUC's move from opposition to support of European integration set a fundamentally new agenda for British labor unions and ended an important rupture between the TUC and the broader European labor movement (which was much more supportive of the integration project). Second, the TUC's volte-face paved the way for the Labour Party's own rapprochement with Europe, facilitating its own move to a position of mainstream Europeanism in the 1990s which was far more

¹ Throughout this paper, I use the term European Community or EC to refer to what is now the European Union since this was the most common appellation during the period analyzed here. Usage of the current name followed the implementation of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993. Since during most of the period under discussion in this paper the term European Union was not yet in use, I have opted to consistently apply the term European Community rather than switch among terms or adopt some sort of combined term like EEC/EC/ EU.

² Data are from various TUC Congress reports, but see also Ebbinghaus and Visser, *Unions in Western Europe since 1945*, 2000, for comparative union membership data for West European states over the entire postwar period.

³ Only Germany's DGB came close in terms of membership figures, ranging from nearly 4.5 million to nearly 8 million members over the same period. See, e.g. <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/eiro/1999/10/feature/de9910116f.htm>.

moderate than Thatcher's increasingly strident and unpopular anti-Europeanism, and thus partly accounting for the period of Labour hegemony since 1997.

Understanding the dynamics which motivated the TUC's attitudinal change on Europe also illuminates the changing costs and benefits of EC membership for British workers. The British tabloid press seems to love nothing more than running stories about the dangers, infringements and transgressions emanating from Brussels. But as an exploration of the TUC's evolving European strategy makes clear, there is much more to the story than these attention-grabbing headlines. Although one would never know it from these stories, the EC has been an important source of tangible benefits for British workers, who can thank Brussels for a host of social benefits and workplace protections.

Organized into four sections, this article aims to both illuminate and analyze the causes and effects of the TUC's emerging Europeanism during the late 1980s and 1990s. Section one consists of an empirical study, based in archival research,⁴ of the TUC's evolving stance on European integration and the EC. In the 1950s and 1960s, during the period when the European integration project first took off, the TUC was the largest, oldest and arguably the most developed trade union center – or national confederation – in Western Europe.⁵ Certainly it saw itself that way.⁶ While some trade union centers on the Continent saw European integration as a means of advancing labor's social ideals and international fraternity, the TUC viewed integration skeptically and saw the British government as the most important arena for influence. For decades, traditional British insularity

⁴ Materials are drawn from the TUC's own archival holdings at the London Metropolitan University, the ETUC archives at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, and the TUC's annual Congress reports.

⁵ Ebbinghaus and Visser, "United Kingdom/Great Britain," 2000.

⁶ TUC, "Economic Association with Europe" 1956.

combined with a union movement that was strong at the national level pushed the European project into a position of secondary importance – even irrelevance – to the TUC.

Over the 1970s, close TUC collaboration with the Labour government, coupled with the negative effects of European Community accession (seen as improperly negotiated by Heath's Conservative government), reinforced the TUC's emphasis on national rather than European channels of influence. In this period, and all the way through most of the 1980s, the TUC took one of the most anti-European positions of all European trade union centers. Delegates from the TUC Council and its affiliated member organizations meet annually in Congress,⁷ and year after year the TUC passed resolutions declaring its opposition to Britain's membership of the EC and calling for UK withdrawal.⁸ Then, in the late 1980s, the TUC's position on Europe radically changed, and in the run-up to the 1992 Single Market project, the TUC became an active promoter and publicizer of the advantages of integration for the labor movement.

Given the realities of institutional inertia and the TUC's long history of Euroskepticism, the question of *why* the TUC reoriented itself towards the European Community in the late 1980s has never been satisfactorily explained. Section two is an analysis of the factors which account for the TUC's 'turnaround' on the EC question in the 1980s. I argue that the cause is to be found in the conjunction of Margaret Thatcher's general clampdown on British unions in the 1980s and the cultivation during the same period of a European-level social space under the political leadership of Commission President Jacques Delors. Thatcher's successful attack on union power explains why the TUC (and many of its affiliates) sought new venues and forms of power; but equally important,

⁷ Delegates from the TUC affiliates and the TUC's General Council meet annually in September for a Congress that approves the policies to be pursued by the General Council over the course of the ensuing year.

⁸ Motions against the EC were carried in 1973, 1974, 1976, 1977, 1979, 1980, 1981 and 1982. In 1983, a motion intended to help the TUC overcome its opposition to the EC was lost.

Delors' efforts to foster European social policies and institutionalize a process of social dialogue between European-level workers' and employers' organizations explains why the TUC, like many of its Continental counterparts, was attracted to the European level. In short, while the European social agenda has always lagged behind its liberal, market-opening program, since the mid-1980s the EC has become significantly more labor-friendly. In fact, as detailed in section three, the EC has become an important source of benefits and rights for British workers in areas that include paid holiday leave, guaranteed rights for pregnant and part-time workers, and enforced limits on working time, among others. This, as much as the British Conservatives' anti-labor agenda, has helped to reverse the TUC's stance on European integration.

Section four outlines the TUC's reinvented European strategy since its European conversion, focusing on the 1990s. It is based largely on interviews, within the TUC offices in London and Brussels, and in the European Commission, Parliament, and Economic and Social Committee. With Social Europe now looking much more labor friendly than Thatcher's liberal Britain, the TUC needed to develop new strategies in order to retain relevance. The tripartite bodies and consultative arrangements which once provided the TUC with so much domestic influence were curtailed by Thatcher, while at the same time the TUC's traditional focus on domestic rather than European policies and avenues of influence left it without tools to act effectively in the increasingly important European arena. The result was an effort over the 1990s to both rethink and restructure the TUC's approach to interest representation. The result of all these collective changes – attitudinal as well as strategic – was a fundamental reorientation of the TUC.

I. From skepticism to hostility to hope: The TUC's changing position on the European Community

Before looking at the transformation of both British and European labor politics in the 1980s, we must cast our glance backward to understand the TUC's Euroskepticism since at least the 1960s. Perhaps the single greatest explanatory factor is the TUC's substantial influence in British politics until the 1980s. Given the TUC's domestic strength, the national arena was understood to be the venue in which organized labor's battles were fought and won, where workers' interests were to be advanced, and where political influence was to be sought. Even though regular alternations in government took place, the Conservative governments never seriously challenged the social basis of the post-war settlement (i.e. full employment, generous social provisions and an institutionalized role for the trade unions). From the 1960s, the TUC enjoyed privileged access to policy-making under both Right and Left governments through consultation and tripartite bodies, the most important of which was the National Economic Development Council. Because of its consistent position of strength and its success in achieving its interests domestically, the TUC never seriously rethought its insular stance vis-à-vis the European Community. During this period the European arena was seen as practically irrelevant to British workers' interests. Especially through the 1970s, firmly entrenched and at the height of its power, the TUC preferred to look inward for national solutions to economic and social issues rather than towards Europe.

Early accession negotiations and TUC skepticism

The earliest roots of European integration began in 1951 with the founding of the European Coal and Steel Community. Britain was invited to join but declined. This decision was fully supported by the TUC, which opposed joining in order to protect British economic and political sovereignty and Commonwealth trading preferences, and because of a firm belief in British exceptionalism. Perhaps

even more importantly, though, the TUC was convinced that its own domestic arrangements – which it saw as “the most progressive socially ... in Western Europe” – far outstripped those on the Continent.⁹ For the same reasons, the TUC also supported the decision to remain outside the Common Market when it was founded in 1958. Very quickly, however, the economic costs of Britain’s choice were felt and the MacMillian government requested in 1961 that Britain be considered for membership in the EC. Britain’s membership request was twice vetoed by de Gaulle (in 1963 and again in 1967) before an accession agreement was finally negotiated by Heath’s Conservative government in the early 1970s. The TUC was initially skeptical, but open to the idea of joining under the right conditions. However, as the contours of the UK’s membership requirements became clearer, the TUC moved further into the opposition camp.

During Britain’s first application for EC membership the TUC again raised concerns about sovereignty, the Commonwealth and domestic social standards in a 1961 position pamphlet on Europe. Additionally, according to the TUC’s critique, the Treaty of Rome, which founded the EC, placed insufficient emphasis on full employment and failed to allow for adequate trade union representation in the European Social and Economic Committee.¹⁰ The TUC remained on the fence during Britain’s second application, in 1967, this time under Wilson’s Labour government. The TUC supported negotiations (and entry) in principle, but opted to wait and see what the terms of entry were before issuing a formal position on the desirability of membership.¹¹ In any event, De Gaulle again refused to negotiate and the issue was postponed for another three years.

⁹ TUC, “Economic Association with Europe” 1956: 11.

¹⁰ TUC, “TUC Statement of Policy and Background Report: TUC Views” 1961.

¹¹ TUC, “Britain and the EEC: A Review of the Principle Economic and Social Issues” 1967.

But the main emphasis of the TUC during the 1960s was on domestic, not European, matters.

There was indeed some reason for the TUC to believe that the European level was not its most important source of influence. During Woodcock's tenure as Secretary General (1960-69), the TUC sought new sources of power through governmental relationships and institutionalized an important new role in economic policy-making.¹² In 1962, Macmillan created the National Economic Development Council, a tripartite forum which for two decades would be influential in economic planning and an important source of TUC strength – and of legitimacy in the eyes of its affiliates. In the 1970s and especially during the Labour government of 1974-1979, the unions in general and the TUC in particular reached a peak of influence through their involvement in setting pay policy. Furthermore, the government consulted the TUC on a range of issues and it had representatives on numerous quasi-governmental economic planning, industrial, training, educational, community and health bodies.¹³

British accession and TUC opposition

Negotiations on Britain's third and final application to join the EC were formally opened on June 30, 1970. As framed in a supplementary report drafted by the TUC General Council and debated at the 1970 Congress, the TUC position was relatively open to the possibility that suitable terms of accession could be negotiated.¹⁴ However, the TUC also spelled out a number of economic concerns that would need to be addressed before its support would be granted. These concerns centered on Britain's balance of payment problems, the burden of the EC's Common Agricultural Policy, and the loss of preferential relations with the Commonwealth.

¹² Taylor, *The TUC: From the General Strike to New Unionism*, 2000: 155-63.

¹³ Taylor, *The Trade Union Question in British Politics: Government and Unions Since 1945*, 1993.

¹⁴ TUC, "Britain and the EEC - Supplementary Report to 102nd Congress" 1970.

As negotiations proceeded and the TUC's concerns were not reflected in the terms of accession, the TUC moved from qualified skepticism to outright opposition to EC membership. Indeed, the 1971 Congress was marked by scathing criticism of the Conservative government's "needless" capitulation over Britain's contribution to the Community budget, and TUC General Secretary Vic Feather proclaimed starkly that, "the British people would need to think twice before signing any treaty – whether the Treaty of Rome or the Treaty of Timbuktoo – if the terms were as bad as these."¹⁵ A large majority of Congress delegates agreed, and voted against accession of the UK to the EC.¹⁶

TUC opposition notwithstanding, in 1972 the Heath government signed the accession treaty, paving the way for the UK to join the EC on January 1, 1973. Although the TUC did not succeed in keeping Britain out of the EC, this failure was overshadowed by a domestic victory later in the same year. Indeed, the TUC won what it considered a much more important domestic battle, when Heath's government first backed away from economic and industrial reform in the face of widespread trade union opposition and growing unemployment, and second, welcomed the TUC into broad tripartite talks with the government and the Confederation of British Industry.¹⁷ Once again, domestic – not European – politics took precedence for the TUC.

The TUC, victorious in its showdown with the Conservative government, was in no mood to dilute its opposition to Britain's accession to the EC. At its 1972 Congress the TUC both declared its opposition in principle to joining the EC, and condemned the terms of accession, describing them as surrendering the right to freely determine independent social policies.¹⁸ Congress called for a

¹⁵ TUC, "Britain and the EEC: Report to the 103rd Annual Congress" 1971.

¹⁶ TUC, "Britain and the EEC: 1971 Congress Debate" 1971.

¹⁷ Taylor, *The Trade Union Question in British Politics: Government and Unions Since 1945*, 1993: 202-3.

¹⁸ TUC, "TUC General Council's Report 1972" 1972.

future Labour government to reverse the commitments unless new terms, consistent with British interests, were negotiated and the consent of the electorate was given. Two months later the TUC called for a UK boycott all EC institutions and vowed to refuse its seats in the EC's representative bodies upon Britain's accession. The TUC's actions raised an uproar. Trade unions in the other EC states were affronted by the TUC's lack of solidarity. A spokesman for the European Trade Union Confederation fumed that, "It is all part of a sterile game by the British Left to pretend that Britain is not part of Europe."¹⁹ Indeed, from the point of view of the TUC, being a part of Europe hardly seemed to matter at all.

George Thompson, Britain's first delegate to the European Commission (and a committed Europeanist from the Labour party) was exasperated by the TUC's actions, and publicly proclaimed to the Conference of British Industry in Europe that, "If the British TUC would only co-operate wholeheartedly in the work of the Community, they would find themselves by far the most influential trade union centre in Western Europe." He then proceeded to outline the representational opportunities that the TUC was foregoing in the EC: three representatives at the European Social Fund, four on committees dealing with the freedom of movement of workers inside the Community, two to deal with vocational training, six positions on the Coal and Steel Consultative Committee, eight in the Economic and Social Committee, and an unspecified number to represent agricultural, transport, fishery and railway workers in the Joint Advisory Committee on Social Problems.²⁰ But, in fact, the TUC at that point was far less interested in exercising its influence in Europe than it was in exercising its influence domestically. In 1973 the UK finally joined the EC, but the replacement of General Secretary Vic Feather with Len Murray the same year

¹⁹ Quoted in Farr, "TUC boycott angers 'Six' unions," *The Daily Telegraph*, 1972. (Press clipping archived at the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.)

²⁰ Thompson, "British Trade Unions and the EEC" 1972.

only fanned the flames of the TUC's resistance to EC membership: at the September Congress the TUC once again voted its opposition to membership.

TUC hostility: Labour government, membership renegotiation and the referendum on EC membership

When the Labour Party returned to power in 1974, the TUC ascended to the peak of its power. Its close ties to government were institutionalized in the so-called Social Contract, a consensus on economic and industrial policies which was hammered out by the Labour-TUC Liaison Committee during Labour's opposition.²¹ On the European front, the Wilson government sought to renegotiate the terms of accession agreed upon by the previous government. In September the TUC's annual Congress again declared its opposition to British membership in the EC and urged government to speed up renegotiation which would restore Parliamentary sovereignty and reject the CAP.

However, the Congress stopped short of calling for withdrawal from the EC and instead called for a referendum on continued British membership in the EC. Wilson failed to secure major concessions, but on June 5, 1975, the question of British membership in the EC was indeed put to the public.

In the lead-up to the referendum, the TUC produced several pamphlets campaigning against the EC, and Murray went on the stump disseminating the TUC position. On March 7 he gave a speech to the French Chamber of Commerce in Great Britain in which he stated frankly that, "...the TUC says that Britain should not be in a market of which competition is its guiding principle" and criticized the EC's emphasis on economics and business to the exclusion of social welfare and social

²¹ The Labour-TUC Liaison Committee was composed of an equal number of members of the party's Shadow Cabinet, its National Executive Committee and members of the TUC.

justice.²² In comparison to this, he highlighted the TUC's close relationship with the Labour government and lauded the Social Contract under which the main trade union demands had been met. It was clear that, in Murray's view, with a Labour government in place there was little to be gained – economically or politically – from EC membership.

But the majority of the British did not agree. In April the House of Commons voted on continuing Britain's membership in the EC. The result was 396 for (70%) and 170 against (30%). In the national referendum, in June, 67.5% said yes to the question, "Do you think the UK should stay in the European Community (the Common Market)?" In September 1975, at its annual Congress, the TUC decided to accept the outcome of the British referendum on EC membership, even while Murray expressed his personal discontent in a letter to the European Trade Union Confederation in which he emphasized that the TUC would continue to seek reforms.²³

This acceptance, however, turned out to be fleeting, and in 1977 the TUC again debated withdrawal. Once more, the basic argument was over the economic costs of membership, specifically the odious burden of the CAP, and the inability of the TUC to exercise adequate influence over EC policies. One speaker, drawing sharp contrasts between the TUC's tremendous influence domestically and a Community immune to reform, proclaimed, "To those who say we should stay in [the EC] and alter the Common Agricultural Policy, I say we have about as much chance of doing that as of removing Everest with a shovel."²⁴ The 1979 Congress approved a motion which called for the TUC to "reconsider" the UK's membership in the EC if the CAP was not reformed and Britain's budgetary contribution lowered.²⁵ But it was in 1980 that the TUC finally committed to a policy of withdrawal.

²² Murray, "The TUC and Europe" 1975.

²³ Murray, "Letter from TUC General Secretary to ETUC General Secretary about new TUC resolution vis-à-vis the EEC." 1975.

²⁴ TUC, "Report of 109th Annual Trades Union Congress" 1977: 500.

²⁵ TUC, "Report of 111th Annual Trades Union Congress" 1979: 602.

At a Congress where one delegate proclaimed that, “The TUC’s alternative economy cannot be realised as long as we remain in the EEC,”²⁶ delegates passed a motion stating that, “Congress believes that it would be in the best interests of the British people for the UK to withdraw from the EEC, and to work for peaceful and equitable relationships with all nations in Europe and the rest of the world. Congress urges this Government to start negotiations on the withdrawal of the UK from the EEC.”²⁷ The motion was subsequently subject to an amendment calling for withdrawal to be put to a referendum before government action was taken.

What a difference a decade makes: The TUC’s turnaround on Europe in the 1980s

As one pro-European delegate to the 1980 Congress wrote in a Report to ETUC Secretariat on the TUC’s 1980 Congress,

The striking thing about the debate is that no one had anything to say in favor of the EEC, and the question at stake was whether Congress thought that Great Britain should start immediately to negotiate its withdrawal or whether it should first hold a referendum.²⁸

But in fact, the 1980 Congress marked the high tide mark of the TUC’s anti-Europeanism and ushered in a decade of fundamental reorientation vis-à-vis Europe. If the Congress was divided in 1980 only over whether or not to hold a referendum before pulling Britain out of the EC, by the end

²⁶ TUC, “Report of 112th Annual Trades Union Congress” 1980: 488.

²⁷ TUC, “Report of 112th Annual Trades Union Congress” 1980: 487.

²⁸ Coldrick, “Conférence Annuelle du TUC de 1980” 1986. (The report was written in French: “*Ce qui est frappant concernant le débat, c’est que personne n’avait quelque-chose à dire en faveur de la C.E.E., et la question en jeu était de savoir si le Congrès pensait que la Grande-Bretagne devait commencer tout de suite à négotier son retrait ou s’il fallait d’abord procéder à un référendum.*”)

of the decade Brussels had become the object of the TUC's hopes for revitalization. It is fair to say that the TUC engaged with Europe in a markedly different manner after 1988, and its transformation was very rapid. While both the 1982 and 1983 Congresses touched on the TUC's policy of withdrawal, established at the 1980 Congress, neither was characterized by the intense debate or hostility that characterized the 1980 proceedings, and during the next four years discussion of the EC was conspicuously absent from the Congress. When the EC reappeared on the agenda in 1988, the tone of the debate was markedly different and launched the TUC in a completely different direction.

Instead of debating withdrawal, the 1988 Congress was marked by a dawning awareness that the EC had become a strategically important arena for British unions, and that the TUC urgently needed to craft a new European strategy. The TUC's new stance was marked in several ways. Commission President Jacques Delors was invited to address the Congress, where he received not only a warm introduction by Norman Willis, the TUC General Secretary, but received a standing ovation from the assembled delegates. But within the British union movement, the statement still remembered as capturing the TUC's definitive turning point on Europe was made by Ron Todd (head of the TGWU, one of the TUC's largest affiliates) at the 1988 Congress. Expressing the collective sentiment that 'Brussels is the only game in town,'²⁹ Todd's comments marked the moment when the TUC turned the corner on its Euroskeptic past and moved forward in a completely new direction. This new European orientation was based, not on opposition to British membership in the EC, but on using the European arena to advance the TUC's interests. In reality, the commonly cited line is a misquote, but one which captures the spirit. In his actual address, he said that,

²⁹ This speech was referred to in interviews, if not accurately quoted, by numerous TUC officials, both in Brussels and in London.

The only card game in town at the moment is in a town called Brussels, and it is a game of poker where we have got to learn the rules and learn them fast. We do not fancy that we are slow on the uptake in industrial negotiations, but this is a new kind of negotiating and now is the time for us to learn some new rules, to learn some new languages, to learn who is who and what is what among our trade union counterparts in the other European countries, to learn how to make the best of Community committees.³⁰

From 1988, the TUC's policy of EC withdrawal was dropped. In its place a new policy of active engagement – with the EC political institutions, with the ETUC and with the TUC's union counterparts across Europe – intended to “maximize the benefits and minimize the costs” of EC membership took center stage.³¹

In order to understand the TUC about-face on the EC between 1980 and 1988, we must understand the important developments which unfolded in the interim. Both domestic level changes and developments beyond Britain's borders had a tremendous impact on the TUC and helped reshape its position on Europe. Domestically, Thatcher's iron fist policy towards the trade unions became much clearer in her second term (after 1983). The total defeat of the coal miners' strike in 1984 was a watershed moment for British unionists. It was, after all, the coal miners who brought the Heath government to its knees in the early 1970s, wresting important concessions from that Conservative government. Any hope within the Labour movement for a reprise had been dashed by the mid-1980s, as Thatcher's multi-pronged campaign against the unions became increasingly clear. At the

³⁰ TUC, “Report of 120th Annual Trades Union Congress” 1988: 572.

³¹ The phrase is taken from a TUC pamphlet (TUC, “Maximising the Benefits Minimising the Costs: TUC Report on Europe 1992” 1988.) widely distributed to its affiliates in an effort to highlight the benefits from European integration.

European level, too, important changes were taking place: Delors initiated a process of European-level Social Dialogue which was to bring together European peak associations of unions and employers to observe and consult on the policy process, and to negotiate agreements which themselves would have the force of policy.

It is against this backdrop – of Thatcher’s exclusionary policies and Delors’ introduction of the Social Dialogue – that the TUC softened its position on Europe and invited Delors to address the Congress in 1988. Despite the TUC’s repeatedly negative appraisal of the EC over the course of the UK’s membership, Delors’ message to the unionists was received enthusiastically by the delegates. Certainly his own background as a trade unionist gave him some credibility.³² Further, his depiction of himself as an architect of Social Europe made him a popular figure, especially when compared with Thatcher’s tendency towards union antagonism, free-market liberalism and social deregulation.

Looking back at the 1988 Congress in light of subsequent developments, it is clear that this marked not only the TUC’s reconciliation with the European project, but more significantly, the beginning of a revision of the TUC’s European strategy. In retrospect, we can identify two important changes in the TUC’s stance on the EC, both products of the changing opportunity structure the TUC faced in Whitehall and in Brussels. The first was the recognition and embrace of the idea that the TUC should play an important role in the EC’s future developments. As the single largest West European union confederation (and largest affiliate to the ETUC), the TUC had universally been recognized as an important player in the European labor movement – one of the major reasons its anti-Europeanism was so exasperating to its more pro-integrationist continental counterparts. While the

³² Delors had been active in the French Christian trade union movement (CFTC).

TUC's boycott of EC committees had long since been abandoned,³³ the sentiment that Europe was not a particularly important venue for the TUC had remained strong. So Willis's claim to the Congress that, "There is a vital, influential role for the TUC in the European Community"³⁴ marked a real change of opinion within the TUC leadership. Tacitly, it was also a recognition that the TUC had no such role to play in Thatcher's Britain.

The TUC also revised its stance on the significance of the EC for advancing the TUC's interests. For more than a decade, the TUC had seen the EC primarily in terms of its costs for Britain (a discriminatory agricultural policy, too much free market emphasis, and encroachments on parliamentary sovereignty), but the 1988 Congress emphasized, for the first time, the potential benefits of the EC's emerging social policy. It was the TGWU's Ron Todd, again, who summed up the TUC's new spirit in rousing terms:

It is no secret that many of us have been sceptical about there being any benefits in the European dimension.... But now we have it from the President of the Commission himself that he is determined to press forward on this front as part of the new European company statute. In the short term, we have not a cat in hell's chance of achieving that in Westminster.³⁵

In short, the recognition at the 1988 Congress was that EC's social developments were far more in accordance with the TUC's ambitions than the policies coming out of the British government.

³³ The boycott lasted only until 1975.

³⁴ TUC, "Report of 120th Annual Trades Union Congress" 1988: 567.

³⁵ TUC, "Report of 120th Annual Trades Union Congress" 1988: 572.

It is clear that, by 1988, key actors within the TUC had come to view Brussels as a path by which the unyielding Conservative government at home might be circumvented. But it is doubtful whether the TUC could ever have rallied such support for the EC without the push of the Delors Commission to incorporate a social dimension into European integration. As important as Thatcher's government was to the general reorientation of the TUC in the 1980s, the hard-line policy of the Conservatives but one of the two key factors in the TUC's reorientation towards Europe. The push for Social Europe was also pivotal in changing the TUC perspective.

II. A door closes and a window opens? The changing nature of union influence in Britain and Brussels

The 1980s marked a period of fundamental changes in unions' constraints and opportunities. Just as unions were losing ground in Thatcher's Britain, a new set of opportunities – for social protection and for union representation – was opening up in Delors' Brussels. To better understand the reorientation of the TUC's stance on the EC in the 1980s we must understand these changes more fully than we have so far done. This is also critical background for understanding why Brussels became so important as a policy arena for the TUC in the 1990s, as will be discussed in sections three and four. This section first highlights the extent to which Thatcher clamped down on the unions' traditional sources of strength and second the optimism inspired by the prospect of Delors' Social Europe.

Liberal Britain

Thatcher's assault on trade union power was a logical outgrowth of her emphasis on liberal economics and an ideology of individualism, and it was waged through four separate Acts of

Parliament between 1980 and 1988,³⁶ along with a host of accompanying legislation.³⁷ The collective result was a substantial diminishment of union power and a related decline in union membership, which further reduced the influence of organized labor. Union operations were affected by a host of government interventions, the most significant of which came in the form of new restrictions on unions' ability to legally engage in industrial action (most importantly, strikes). But reforms also imposed new requirements, sometimes onerous and at unions' own expense, on the internal procedures of unions, such as balloting obligations. Other reforms undermined unions' power vis-à-vis employers, by changing the procedure for formally recognizing unions. Furthermore, significant reforms to the enforcement of employment rights and wage setting undermined unions' interests.

Perhaps the single most damaging aspect of Thatcher's assault on union power came by means of her new restrictions on industrial action. Over the course of the nineteenth century, British unions acquired not the *right to strike* – as in so many other countries – but rather *statutory immunities* exempting them from civil action by employers for engaging in industrial action in the course of trade disputes. (Significantly, immunities were not granted for industrial action in the course of political disputes.) A series of reforms and redefinitions over the 1980s had the effect of restricting the circumstances under which these immunities applied, and thus of eliminating protections for striking unions and workers. For example, a 1982 redefinition of “trade disputes” restricted the term to disputes “wholly or mainly” concentrated on the terms or conditions of employment. Crucially, this reclassified a whole range of union concerns, including privatization, as “political disputes” to which immunities did not apply – and which could not legally be used as the

³⁶ The four Acts were the Employment Acts of 1980, 1982, and 1988 and the Trade Union Act of 1984. Another subsequent reform, beyond the scope of this article, came with the Trade Union Reform and Employment Rights Act of 1993.

³⁷ Towers, “Running the Gauntlet: British Trade Unions Under Thatcher, 1979-1988” 1989: 168-171.

justification for industrial action.³⁸ A second reform, in 1984, imposed a further condition on unions' ability to engage in industrial action by requiring union members to approve the action in advance via secret ballot. Furthermore, Thatcher sought to contain the scope of industrial action by restricting secondary action (e.g. solidarity strikes) and protecting from disciplinary action those individual union members who opted *not* to participate in industrial actions approved by majority vote.

Collectively, these reforms severely constrained unions' ability to wield the power of the strike, diminishing one of their most important forms of influence. But another thread of reforms likewise undermined union authority, by allowing employers to refuse or revoke recognition of unions. Since only recognized unions have the authority to undertake collective bargaining on behalf of their members, the 1980 reform ending unions' ability to unilaterally apply for recognition put them at the mercy of employers for recognition and thus for bargaining authority.

Additionally, over the course of the 1980s, unions saw their members' statutory rights rolled back by a series of reforms to employment rights and minimum wage agreements. Workers' ability to enforce individual employment rights, established during the 1960s and 1970s and adjudicated by tribunals, became increasingly restricted. The statutes that protected workers from unfair dismissal, provided compensation in instances of redundancy, and enforced principles of equality in the workplace, remained on the books. But workers' ability to enforce them through the tribunals was circumscribed by two important reforms. First, the qualifying employment period – the amount of time employees must have held their job before registering a complaint – was lengthened from six months to two years. Second, while previously the burden of proof had been on the employer to

³⁸ Towers, "Running the Gauntlet: British Trade Unions Under Thatcher, 1979-1988" 1989: 170.

demonstrate that no statutory violation had occurred, changes under Thatcher meant that the burden of proof increasingly fell on the employee.³⁹

At the same time, in the name of liberating employers from the fetters of collectivism, many British workers lost their guarantee of minimum pay. Although Britain in this era had no universal, statutory minimum wage, around two dozen Wages Councils negotiated minimum pay rates – along with overtime rates and holiday entitlements and wages⁴⁰ – for about two and a half million workers.⁴¹ With roots as far back as 1909, the Wages Councils were composed of workers' and employers' representatives along with independent members, and their agreements acquired the force of law. An initial assault on the Wages Councils came with the 1986 Wages Act, when workers under the age of 21 were excluded from their jurisdiction and the authority to negotiate holiday leave and pay was ended. (Subsequently, in 1993, the Wages Councils were abolished, ending statutory minimum pay for virtually all workers until a national minimum wage was established in 1999 by Blair's Labour government.)

The collective effect of all these reforms was to demoralize and weaken Britain's trade union movement. This also led to a precipitous decline in union membership, further reducing union power. (Between 1980 and 1988, TUC membership fell by a quarter, from more than 12 million to just over 9 million.)⁴² For the TUC, which affiliated so many of the affected unions and indirectly represented so many of Britain's workers, Thatcher's anti-unionism was compounded by her disinterest in maintaining the TUC's consultative role in government. In particular, she disdained

³⁹ Towers, "Running the Gauntlet: British Trade Unions Under Thatcher, 1979-1988" 1989: 168.

⁴⁰ "Holiday" is here used in the British sense, to indicate what Americans refer to as vacation.

⁴¹ This marks a decline from the peak of the Wages Councils in the 1950s when 66 councils covered 3.5 million workers. See, e.g. <http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/ciro/1999/04/feature/uk9904196f.htm>.

⁴² Data are from various TUC Congress reports, but see also Ebbinghaus and Visser, *Unions in Western Europe since 1945*, 2000, for comparative union membership data for West European states over the entire postwar period.

the tripartite National Economic Development Council, calling it a “waste of time”, downgrading it from monthly to quarterly meetings in 1987, and abolishing it completely in 1992.⁴³

Social Europe

It is no wonder that, against this national backdrop, the emerging social agenda in Brussels began to look so attractive. Delors’ program to develop Social Europe – as distinct from the Single Market which remained at the heart of the European project – had two pillars. The first, predating Delors but ballooning during his reign of Commission activism, comprised a raft of social legislation to complement and in some cases mitigate the effects of market liberalization. The second, developed under Delors’ own initiative, was to create a partnership role for the unions through which, by negotiating with employers, they could contribute meaningfully to the policy process. Both aspects of Social Europe stood in stark contrast to the changes taking place in Britain, where both social protections and union influence were being rolled back in the name of individualism and liberalism.

While European social policy had always been (and today remains) relatively underdeveloped in comparison with the trade and competition policies at the heart of the common market, even before Delors’ social agenda there had been several developments of particular benefit to British workers.⁴⁴ For instance, in the area of employment rights, two EC directives from the 1970s created explicit employment rights for European workers which did not previously exist in Britain.⁴⁵ The first, the 1975 Collective Redundancies Directive (75/129/EEC), required consultation with workers’ representatives before redundancies could be carried out, an obligation without precedent in British

⁴³ McIlroy, *Trade Unions in Britain Today*, 1995: 207.

⁴⁴ By no means were these the only social directives of the era. In particular, health and safety in the workplace received special attention. However, as these issues were well covered by British statutes, the European developments were of only peripheral significance to British workers. In marked contrast, the employment rights directives marked a real departure from (and, in the eyes of the unions, improvement upon) the British tradition.

⁴⁵ See Geyer, *Exploring European Social Policy*, 2000: 83-4.

industrial relations. The second, the 1977 Transfer of Undertakings Directive (77/187/EEC),⁴⁶ protected workers' rights during takeovers and mergers. Under British law, the employment relationship had been seen as personal contract: when a business was transferred, all contracts were therefore dissolved and the new employer could choose whether to re-establish them or not. In contrast, under Transfer of Undertakings Directive, employment relationships in such situations would be automatically transferred from the old to the new employer. In other words, workers would be protected from dismissal solely on basis of the transfer. The Directive also required employers to inform and consult the workers' representatives in the firm about the upcoming transfer.

Both of these European employment directives created tangible benefits for British workers⁴⁷ and the prospect of further worker protections also fired the imagination of British unionists. While many of these did not come to fruition until the 1990s, the credible potential of European social legislation, in such contrast to Thatcher's own agenda at the time, was compelling. Perhaps the most captivating to the TUC – and the most appalling to the Thatcher government (as well as to many European employers) – was the prospect of generalizing the consultation rights of these two employment rights directives into a EC-wide system of codetermination within the largest European firms. The issue was first raised in the 1970s, but came to dominate the social agenda in the 1980s with the proposal of the so-called Vredeling Directive.⁴⁸ Proposed in 1980 and named after the Dutch socialist Henk Vredeling, who was Social Affairs Commissioner, the directive would have

⁴⁶ This is also known as the Acquired Rights Directive.

⁴⁷ Their effect, however, was delayed by Thatcher's refusal to fully implement the directives. The Transfer of Undertakings Directive, in particular, clashed with Thatcher's vision of market liberalism and the 1980s saw repeated efforts to stall its application in Britain. The government first delayed implementation of the directive, and later implemented it only partially. As a result, Britain was eventually brought before the European Court of Justice in 1993. The ECJ ruled against Britain in 1994 and Britain has since fully implemented the directive, thus creating new rights for British workers in the event of company mergers or takeovers.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Turner, "Prospects for Worker Participation in Management in the Single Market," 1993.

required large companies to provide biannual reports to their workforce, sharing, among other things, information about the firm's financial situation, production strategies and investment activities. While co-determination was a feature of many continental industrial relations systems, it was completely absent in Britain and would have created a novel form of worker representation. The Vredeling Directive came under fierce and sustained attack from European employers and American multinationals. It also, predictably, drew withering criticism from Thatcher, whose certain veto figured prominently in the Commission's decision to water down the requirements in 1983, and ultimately to pull the directive off the agenda in 1986. (The TUC would have to wait another decade to see the passage of a directive on workers' information rights.)

In addition to promoting social legislation – and perhaps even more importantly – Delors opened up a new avenue of interest representation for unions. Mere months after taking over as Commission President in 1985, Delors initiated a program of European-level Social Dialogue at Val Duchesse, outside of Brussels. Groups representing employers and employees have worked together since the founding of the EC, for example in the Economic and Social Committee or, since the 1970s, in the tripartite Standing Committee on Employment. But only since the mid-1980s has a system of Social Partnership developed, in which the two sides of industry have the authority to negotiate agreements which would have the force of policy. Negotiations are conducted by the Social Partners: unions are represented by the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), while employers are represented by Union of Industrial and Employers' Confederations of Europe (UNICE) and the European Center of Public Enterprises (CEEP). Social Dialogue, which was developed and nurtured by Delors, went beyond ad hoc consultation of the Social Partners, giving them the tools to autonomously negotiate European legislation.

The ETUC summarized the significance of these early years of Social Dialogue in its 1988 Congress Report: “At a time when a number of governments were acting to reduce the role and influence of trade unions in national life, this reaffirmation of their role in the Community's constitution was of real value.”⁴⁹ For the TUC, in particular, the Social Dialogue represented an important development. Most of the domestic tripartite bodies which had been so important for shaping economic policy during the 1960s and 70s (and especially under the Social Pact) had been downgraded and neglected under Thatcher. And as we will see in the next section, the Social Dialogue has been used to create new rights for British workers.

III. European social developments in the 1990s: new benefits for British workers

While it was the *prospect* of a European social agenda more than any on-the-ground reality that drew the interest of the TUC towards the EC in the 1980s, many of the most significant EC social developments had not yet taken place. The failure of the Vredeling Directive in 1986 did not mark the end of Social Europe, but rather the beginning. Armed with the new tool of Social Partnership and the support of Delors’ activist Commission, the ETUC and its national affiliates pushed hard for social advances in the late 1980s and into the 1990s. Important developments occurred in several areas of social policy. Two of the most significant, in terms of benefits to British workers, are workers’ participation and representation rights and improvements to their working conditions.

Worker Participation and Representation

The failure of the Vredeling Directive was not the end of the push for new worker representation and consultation rights, but the successful negotiation of such a directive was only possible with the (initial) exclusion of Britain. The Social Protocol, appended to the Maastricht Treaty, became the

⁴⁹ ETUC, “Report on Activities 1985 - 1987” 1988: 74.

means of hammering out the directive. Since Britain had negotiated an opt-out of the Protocol, it was not subject to any legislation which derived from its procedures. But a crucial consequence of the opt-out was that Britain also had no vote on such legislation. This removed the threat or use of the dreaded British veto, which had played such an important role in the undoing of the Vredeling Directive.

In 1993, the Commissioner for Social Affairs used the procedures outlined in the Social Protocol to advance a new proposal on worker consultation rights. After numerous consultations with the Social Partners, the proposed directive was voted on by the Social Council. With Britain's absence and Portugal's abstention, the proposal passed in 1994. This European Works Councils Directive (94/45/EC) incorporated core elements of the Vredeling Directive, requiring that large multinational firms doing business in at least two EU member states form a European Works Council (EWC) and establish procedures for informing and consulting with employee representatives.⁵⁰

The TUC strongly supported the EWC Directive as a means of bolstering the position of workers, as well as the representation and influence of the unions, within multinational companies (EIRO 1998), and actively campaigned to ensure that British companies were not excluded from the Directive despite the British opt-out. (In 1997, the Blair government signed on to the directive.)

⁵⁰ The directive applies to companies with more than 1000 employees, doing business in two EU countries, and employing more than 150 workers in each country. The law applies equally to European firms, and to firms from third countries employing at least 150 workers in more than one member state.

Working Conditions

A second area of European social policy which has brought tangible benefits to British workers centers on working conditions. Here, there are five main directives to highlight from the 1990s. First, the 1992 Pregnant Workers Directive (92/85/EEC) required employers to assess health and safety risks for pregnant workers, to establish strategies to avoid such risks, and to inform employees of the risks and the steps taken to mitigate them. It also established that pregnant workers would not be obliged to work at night, should be given time off for prenatal exams, and should be entitled to fourteen weeks' maternity leave, during which they were to be protected from dismissal.⁵¹

Second, the 1993 Working Time Directive (93/104/EC) mandated a minimum daily rest period of eleven hours, a rest break in any workday longer than six hours, a workweek of not more than forty-eight hours, and – most controversially – four weeks of annual paid leave. It further recommended that night work not exceed eight hours per twenty-four hour period and that night workers receive free health assessments and be transferred to day work if their health was being negatively affected.⁵²

The Working Time Directive created important new benefits to British workers, as working time had never been actively regulated, and most existing regulations had been rolled back by the Conservatives during the 1980s.⁵³ Furthermore, according to the TUC, the Directive gives paid annual leave to two million British workers who had never been eligible for them under British laws.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Britain opposed the directive in the Council, but, as a 'daughter directive' of the SEA's Art. 118a Framework Agreement on Health and Safety, it was subject to qualified majority (rather than unanimity) voting, and the Directive passed over British objections. (Geyer, *Exploring European Social Policy*, 2000: 87.)

⁵² Certain categories of workers are exempted, and derogations are permitted if employers and workers reached a collective agreement on the subject.

⁵³ Geyer, *Exploring European Social Policy*, 2000:88.

⁵⁴ TUC, "Workers to get more holiday thanks to Europe" 1999. (Press release, Nov. 23, 1999, available at <http://www.tuc.org.uk/law/tuc-613-f0.cfm>.)

Three further directives, all negotiated by the Social Partners, brought new benefits to British workers. The first, on Parental Leave (96/34/EC), was negotiated in 1995-96, and provided a right to a minimum of three months' leave for childbirth or family emergency. The Atypical Workers Directive (97/81/EC), negotiated in 1995-97, regulated working conditions for part-time, short-term and seasonal workers. The Social Partners also negotiated an agreement on working conditions for workers on fixed-term contracts (99/70/EC) which essentially guaranteed that such workers would be subject to the same working conditions as permanent workers.

IV. From Whitehall to Brussels: Refocusing TUC influence

By the time of the TUC's turnaround on the EC, unionists had virtually given up hope of exerting meaningful influence over the British government for as long as the Conservatives held power, and Thatcher's re-election in 1987 left no room for hope of an early Labour resurgence. As a result, during the 1990s the TUC began to turn its efforts towards shaping the policies coming out of Brussels, as Europe in the Delors era was easily the more labor-friendly venue. This section relays some of the insights gleaned from interviews and conversations with TUC officials and representations from the EU institutions about specifically *how* the TUC sought to exert European-level influence during the first years following its European conversion.

Until the mid-1980s, the TUC's European strategy – such as it was – was to ply its influence with the British government. Like other organized interests, the TUC competed to shape government policy, which was then pursued within the intergovernmental Council of Ministers and European

Council, and at the intergovernmental conferences where European treaties are negotiated.⁵⁵ For instance, prior to and during the negotiations which led to the UK's accession, the TUC produced a series of policy memos and pamphlets to publicize its position on EC membership. After accession, the TUC used national channels of influence with Wilson's Labour government to push for renegotiation of the terms of entry. Until it was reformed in the mid-1980s, the TUC's decades-long frustration with the CAP was taken up with successive British governments.

From around 1983, however, it became clear that the TUC had little prospect of significantly influencing Thatcher's government policy on the EC or on any other matter of significance. Dovetailing with these domestic changes, Delors' rhetoric and action on Social Europe drew the TUC's attention to the potential of the European level as an alternative source of both pro-labor policy and political influence. As a result, the target of TUC's European strategy became less often the British government and more often *European-level* actors.

In order to better understand and access these actors, the TUC created a satellite office in Brussels (in the International Trade Union House, the same building that houses the ETUC) in 1993. It has become conventional wisdom that half, or more, of the laws implemented in EC member states are decided at the European level. However, for many national actors – and the TUC was no exception – both the details and the content of these European directives, as well as the processes by which they are decided, were generally poorly understood. Handicapped by its long-held anti-European stance and nearly exclusive focus on the national arena, the TUC was particularly slow to educate itself about the mechanics of European policy-making. By the time the EC entered TUC

⁵⁵ The basic logic of this pluralist understanding of interest representation is at the core of the liberal intergovernmentalist approach to EU theory. See, e.g. Moravcsik, "Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics," 1997 and Moravcsik, *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht*, 1998.

consciousness as an arena for positive change, it found itself in a position of trying to use old methods of influence in a changed policy environment, where British decision-makers were not only hostile to the unions, but were no longer responsible for an increasing share of economic and other policy decisions. As the European arena continued to increase in significance for national trade union confederations after the implementation of the Single European Act and the concomitant push to complete the Single Market, the job of collecting and analyzing information regarding the actors, institutions, policy-making, and legislative outputs of the Community became increasingly important for the TUC. The decision to open the Brussels office thus represented both a commitment to make better use of the European arena, and a practical means of owning up to the changed reality of the 1992 project, where European policies were understood to shape national politics and economics in increasingly important ways.

The purpose of opening the office was to address the twin challenges of gathering information and representing TUC interests. TUC representatives in Brussels were charged with maintaining familiarity with the European institutions, key actors, European legislation in progress and the ramifications of proposed policies for the British trade union movement.⁵⁶ At the same time, the TUC viewed opening an office in Brussels as a way to strengthen its presence in this concentrated policy environment. A key focus in opening the Brussels office was to lobby the European institutions. The Commission, in particular, has traditionally encouraged the development of European-level associations and for many years favored relations with peak associations by refusing to work with national interest groups.⁵⁷ However, TUC officials in Brussels, both past and present,

⁵⁶ The Brussels office was initially headed by Dave Feickert. Upon his retirement in 2002, he was replaced by Peter Coldrick, a British trade unionist who had formerly worked in the ETUC.

⁵⁷ Greenwood, *Interest Representation in the European Union*, 2003. Although the Commission has since abandoned this as official practice, it still prefers to work with groups organized at a European level rather than with national actors.

have seen the establishment of networks of contacts in the European Commission and Parliament, at the very least, as a key part of their work.

Beyond the core activity of lobbying the European institutions, over the 1990s the office became more broadly responsible for liaising with virtually anyone who could become a potential ally. This means that, in addition to networking with representatives from the various European institutions, the TUC also sought to establish working relationships with delegates and elected officials from Britain and from other member states, as well as the Brussels-based representatives of civil society organizations, employers' groups and business lobbies, the ETUC, and other national union confederations.⁵⁸

Organized interest groups in Brussels often center their networking efforts on co-nationals within the EC institutions. Although the TUC Brussels office admitted to this behavior, interviewees in the TUC, as well as in the European institutions indicated that the TUC – more frequently than other union centers – established a tradition during the 1990s of reaching out to forge relations with key players who are not British. A Danish MEP reported that he is not infrequently approached by unionists from the TUC, and TUC officials in Brussels recall occasions when they approached individuals from other countries who were known or suspected to be in accordance with or sympathetic to the issue at stake. During much of the 1990s, this tendency was perhaps increased by the continuing coolness of relations between the TUC and its own government, although the practice continued even after Blair took office in 1997.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ The information about the activities of the TUC office in Brussels comes primarily from interviews in 2004 with the past and present directors of that office.

⁵⁹ Interviews, 2004, TUC (London) and the TUC's Brussels office.

Another aspect of the Brussels office involved the TUC's role as translator or bridge between its affiliated unions and the political institutions in Brussels. Its 'European Network' (formerly the Network Europe Contact Point program) sought to bring together representatives from the Brussels office, the TUC's national offices, and member affiliations, for regular briefings on European issues. The TUC also encouraged members of its affiliates to visit Brussels to learn about the European institutions and policy processes, and to establish contacts between the affiliates and the TUC Brussels office, the ETUC and various EU institutions, especially the Parliament.⁶⁰

The purpose of establishing such networks was not only educational. As on the national level, many TUC affiliates – but not the TUC itself – possess political funds which are used, among other things, for campaigning and sponsoring members of Parliament. Several of the TUC's largest affiliates sponsor members of the European Parliament, and while these unions are also learning to network at the European level, the TUC's growing European expertise and permanent presence in Brussels strengthens the hand of the TUC Brussels office in its dealings with sponsored MEPs.⁶¹

V. Conclusion

This article holds that both domestic and European factors are critical to understanding the evolution of the TUC's position on the EC in the 1980s and its European strategy in the 1990s. At home, prolonged political exclusion under successive Conservative governments led the TUC to seek out new channels of political influence – both to retain legitimacy in the eyes of its relatively autonomous affiliates as well as to exert influence over political outcomes. At the same time the pull of European factors, especially Delors' emphasis on social developments at the European level (as

⁶⁰ This statement is based on interviews as well as participation in education activities of the TUC's Brussels office in 2004.

⁶¹ At present only one TUC affiliate – the GMB – has established its own office in Brussels. By and large the affiliated unions have delegated European responsibilities to the TUC.

well as the fact that he actively courted the TUC), made the EC an attractive option. The result has been an important reconfiguration of TUC interests with regard to the EC.

The TUC has come to recognize (and publicize) the benefits for British workers that have resulted from European-level social developments such as the creation of the European Works Councils and protective legislation related to atypical workers, female workers, working time, and (most importantly) information and consultation of workers, especially in cases of redundancy.

Despite these European-level social developments, the EC has by no means evolved into the labor-friendly European Union that the TUC and trade unions throughout the member states would like to see. Indeed, the TUC has not been alone in continuing to push for further social developments and critiquing the most neoliberal aspects of the Single Market. All that said, however, the TUC's embrace of Social Europe certainly helped the TUC to dig out of the abyss into which Thatcher was determined to toss the British trade union movement. Firstly, Europe – specifically the social platform – provided a symbolic rallying point through the long years of Conservative political dominance (and has continued to do so given New Labour's determination to distance itself from the trade unions). Secondly, liaising with European institutions has provided the TUC with a new *raison d'être* vis-à-vis its affiliates. While the TUC has, over the post-war period, represented the vast majority of British trade unionists, it is hardly a monolithic bloc with a monopoly on steering British union activities. Its numerous affiliated unions retain almost complete autonomy and, unlike the TUC, many possess political funds and direct links to the Labour Party. Until the 1980s, the primary sources of power for the TUC stemmed from its role in adjudicating disputes among affiliated unions and its position as a conduit to the government, through its position in tripartite

bargaining and on consultative bodies.⁶² When Thatcher downgraded or dispensed with those bodies, the TUC found renewed life in its role as interpreter of European policy. This role may be a step down from the TUC's heyday as partner with government in implementing Labour's Social Contract, but it has provided continuing evidence of one delegate's observation at the 1988 Congress that, "As doors close in Whitehall, doors appear to open in Brussels."⁶³

⁶² Waddington, "Recovering from the Neo-Liberal Assault?" 2000.

⁶³ TUC, "Report of 120th Annual Trades Union Congress" 1988: 580.

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