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# Negotiating ‘outer Europe’: the Trades Union Congress (TUC), transnational trade unionism and European integration in the 1950s

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## ABSTRACT

The 1950s were a frenetic moment in the European integration process during which the European Economic Community (EEC), the ultimately abortive Free Trade Area (FTA), and subsequently the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) were all negotiated. Trade unions showed keen interest in these schemes; moreover, their own highly institutionalised cooperation suggested they might come to play a key role in shaping them. And yet scholars have argued how divergent traditions and domestic pressures precluded the emergence of a coherent trade union platform on European unity. While not rejecting the structural weaknesses of union internationalism in this regard, this article asks why union centres nevertheless continued to engage with one another on the integration question. Focusing on the British Trade Unions Congress (TUC) and deploying a transnational approach to best understand the interaction between the national and international levels, it shows that union linkages still offered the TUC and its counterparts a valuable chance to learn from and persuade others – and even their governments – of their views, objectives and affairs. Such trade union diplomacy was thus in and of itself valuable despite wider union spats and misgivings, and did at times impact the broader language and approach of the countries involved.

## KEYWORDS

Britain; FTA; EFTA; European integration; trade unions; TUC; transnational

The 1950s were a frenetic moment in the European integration process. The six countries that in 1951 signed the Treaty of Paris establishing the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), and later in 1955 opted to ‘relaunch’ their collaboration by establishing an ambitious common market and customs union – a decision that in March 1957 would culminate in the formation of the European Economic Community (EEC) – would of course form the heart of this exercise. But the attention of most Western Europeans in this period was fixed instead on the geographically larger but politically much looser Free Trade Area (FTA), proposed by Britain in late 1956 as a way to lessen the gulf with the Six. France’s decision, after two years of fitful negotiations, to reject this framework thus obliged a number of governments to reassess their entire approach to economic cooperation.<sup>1</sup> The result was that in mid-1959 Austria, Britain, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, Sweden and Switzerland opted to create a smaller industrial trade bloc of their own. Notwithstanding wrangles about agricultural provision and disagreements over the pace and intensity of tariff cuts, the

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<sup>1</sup>See i.e. James Ellison, *Threatening Europe: Britain and the European Community 1955–58* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000); Wolfram Kaiser, *Using Europe, Abusing the Europeans: Britain and European Integration, 1945–63* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1996).

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Seven moved with speed to negotiate the Stockholm Convention drafted in November that same year and officially signed in January 1960. Five months later, the work of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) finally begun.<sup>2</sup>

Trade unions watched these various twists and turns with keen interest.<sup>3</sup> That each of the schemes touched upon some of the well-known preserves of trade unionists like tariffs, quotas, labour mobility and social security meant, after all, that they had an obvious stake in what was being discussed at the European level.<sup>4</sup> Governments aside, trade unions, or more accurately national trade union centres, were also one of the few domestic actors with both the financial clout and human resources necessary to undertake a sustained analysis of such developments.<sup>5</sup> But more significantly perhaps was that by the time topics such as the formation of the FTA and the subsequent creation of EFTA emerged on the agendas of the governments involved, Western Europe's trade union centres had already established a pattern of highly institutionalised cooperation through both the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) set up originally in December 1949 and its European affiliate, the European Regional Organisation (ERO), established a year later. Unlike most other societal or non-state actors, trade union centres hence potentially had available to them a forum within which they could hope not only to share views of these various integration proposals, but also to embrace a common stance that might serve to shape the whole tenor and direction of European integration itself.<sup>6</sup>

And yet lurking behind this internationalism, it seems, lay a contradiction of precisely the sort this special issue is designed to address. For on the one hand trade unions were clearly 'agents of internationalism'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, ties among union centres had emerged as early as the late nineteenth century before being formalised in the late 1910s and deepening further in the years after the Second World War.<sup>8</sup> Both the ICFTU and the ERO were in this sense merely the latest iterations of international union cooperation stretching back several decades.<sup>9</sup> But as labour historians have been quick to note, the reality of union internationalism more generally was, on a day-to-day basis at least, much less successful in practice, constrained as unions seemingly were by divergent national interests, different

<sup>2</sup>Richard T. Griffiths, 'The Importance of Fish for the Creation of EFTA', *EFTA Bulletin* 92, no. 1 (1992): 34–40; Wolfram Kaiser, 'Challenge to the Community: The Creation, Crisis and Consolidation of the European Free Trade Association, 1958–72', *Journal of European Integration History* 3, no. 1 (1997): 7–33; Mikael af Malmberg and Johnny Laursen, 'The Creation of EFTA', in *Interdependence versus Integration: Denmark, Scandinavia and Western Europe 1945–60*, ed. Thorsten Borring Olesen (Odense: Odense UP, 1995).

<sup>3</sup>Focus here is on unions exhibiting centre-left sympathies. On others see for instance Patrick Pasture, 'The Fist of the Dwarf: Formation, Organization and Representation of the Christian Trade Unions (1945–1958)', *Journal of European Integration History* 1, no. 2 (1995): 5–26; Bart de Wilde, ed., *The Past and Future of International Trade Unionism* (Ghent: Amsab, 2000).

<sup>4</sup>For a sense of this interest, Ernst B. Haas, *The Uniting of Europe: Political, Social, and Economic Forces, 1950–1957* (Notre Dame, IN: UDUP, 2004); Andrea Ciampani, ed., *L'altra via per l'Europa. Forze sociali e organizzazione degli interessi nell'integrazione europea (1947–1957)* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1995); Andrea Ciampani, 'The Participation of Free Trade Unions in the Process of European Integration', *Journal of European Integration History* 1, no. 2 (1995): 111–7; Hitoshi Suzuki, 'The High Authority of the ECSC, the European Network of Trade Unions and the DGB: Ideas, Strategies and Achievements', *Moving the Social* 42 (2009): 63–88.

<sup>5</sup>On the peculiar characteristics of trade unions see for instance Keith Abbot, 'Theorising International Trade Unionism', *Global Labour History* 2, no. 3 (2011): 160–79; Patrick Pasture, 'Squaring the Circle? Trade Unions Torn between Class Solidarity and Regional and Cultural Identities in Western Europe', in *Cultural Diversity in Trade Unions: A Challenge to Class Identity?*, ed. Johan Wets (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>6</sup>On unions and other non-state/societal actors see Wolfram Kaiser and Jan-Henrik Meyer, eds., *Societal Actors in European Integration: Polity-Building and Policy-Making 1958–1992* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Wolfram Kaiser, B. Leucht, and M. Rasmussen, eds., *The History of the European Union: Origins of a Trans- and Supranational Polity 1950–72* (London: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>7</sup>Jessica Reinisch, 'Introduction: Agents of Internationalism', *Contemporary European History* 25, no. 2 (2016): 195–205, here 202.

<sup>8</sup>For this early history see for instance Gary K. Busch, *The Political Role of International Trade Unions* (London: Macmillan, 1983); Jytte Klausen and Louise A. Tilly, eds., *European Integration in Social and Historical Perspective* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997); Patrick Pasture, 'The Interwar Origins of International Labour's European Commitment (1919–1934)', *Contemporary European History* 10, no. 2 (2001): 221–37; Patrick Pasture, 'A Century of International Trade Unionism', *IRSH* 47 (2002): 277–89; William A. Pelz, *A People's History of Modern Europe* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 83–102; Geert van Goethem, *The Amsterdam International: The World of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), 1913–1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).

<sup>9</sup>Denis MacShane, *International Labour and the Origins of the Cold War* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992); Peter Weiler, 'The Breakup of the World Federation of Trade Unions', *Diplomatic History* 5, no. 1 (1981): 1–22; Walter Lippgens and Wilfried Loth, eds., *Documents on the History of European Integration: Transnational Organisations of Political Parties and Pressure Groups in the European Union, 1945–1950* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988).

traditions and their own internal pressures.<sup>10</sup> As Marcel van der Linden puts it, ‘myriad opposing short-term interests, political obstacles and cultural differences severely impeded international cooperation. Nationalism, competition among workers from different countries and mutual misunderstanding needed to be overcome time and again’.<sup>11</sup>

This general trend makes it tempting to conclude that on the specific question of European unity, trade unions acted in much the same way. What historiography exists bridging the two topics is certainly dominated by talk of ‘fragmentation’.<sup>12</sup> Palpable also is the sense that there was never really a coherent international trade union policy on European affairs, and that there consequently existed little opportunity for union centres to exert much influence on European cooperation as it evolved around them.<sup>13</sup> What is more, this assessment does appear to be borne out by the actual course of events. Nowhere was this dichotomy between the national and international levels arguably clearer than the British Trades Union Congress (TUC). For on the one hand the TUC had long been a vigorous proponent of international unionism. And its General Council (GC) – which represented some 10 million workers and upon which sat the heads of the largest individual unions in Britain – was likewise a vital cog in the founding of the ICFTU and the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU) which preceded it.<sup>14</sup> Given that Britain was the principal agent behind the ill-fated FTA proposal and subsequent development of EFTA, the TUC might therefore have been expected to make ample use of these contacts to flesh out a uniform international trade union response to them. But the picture painted by most scholarship is rather less comradely. This, so the story goes, had several potential roots. But TUC attitudes appear to have been foremost coloured by its conditional attitude to European integration<sup>15</sup> and unyielding belief that its twin objectives – attaining full employment and the raising of living standards for workers – could be realised by no other route than ‘through a nationally planned economy as the cornerstone of the national welfare state’.<sup>16</sup> The result is that for much of the 1950s the TUC is said regularly to have been at odds with the ‘integrationist aspirations’ of an ERO seen ever more to represent the interests of the union centres of the Six.<sup>17</sup> So too did it apparently act as the ‘lowest common denominator’ in trade union discussions on the integration process.<sup>18</sup> And the TUC itself seems to have been increasingly convinced that the union nexus was trivial to the pursuit of its own goals vis-à-vis European unity.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Stefania Marino, Judith Roosblad, and Rinus Penninx, eds., *Trade Unions and Migrant Workers: New Contexts and Challenges in Europe* (Geneva: International Labor Organization, 2017); Patrick Pasture and Johan Verberckmoes, eds., *Working-Class Internationalism and the Appeal of National Identity: Historical Debates and Current Perspectives* (Oxford: Berg, 1998); Patrick Pasture, ‘Window of Opportunity or Trompe l’œil? The Myth of Labour Unity in Western Europe since 1945’, *Transnational Moments of Change*, eds. Gerd-Rainer Horn and Padraic Kenny (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 27–50; Patrick Pasture, ‘Reflections on the Fate of Ideologies and Trade Unions’, in *The Lost Perspective?: Trade Unions between Ideology and Social Action in the New Europe*, eds. Patrick Pasture, Johan Verberckmoes, and Hans De Witte (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1996); Martin Upchurch, G. Taylor, and A. Mathers, *The Crisis of Social Democratic Trade Unionism in Western Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009).

<sup>11</sup>Marcel van der Linden, ‘Conclusion’, in *International*, 521.

<sup>12</sup>Patrick Pasture, ‘Trade Unions as a Transnational Movement in the European Space 1955–65: Falling Short of Ambitions?’, in *Transnational European Union*, eds. Wolfram Kaiser and Peter Starie (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.; Barbara Barnouin, *The European Labour Movement and European Integration* (London: Frances Pinter, 1986); Maria Eleonora Guasconi, ‘The ICFTU’s Policy towards the European Integration Process from 1950 to 1957’, in *Milieux économiques et intégration européenne en Europe occidentale au XXème siècle*, eds. Éric Bussière and Michel Dumoulin (Aaras: APU, 1998); Patrick Pasture, ‘The Flight of the Robins: The Past and Future of International Trade Unionism’, in *Past and Future*; Pasture, ‘Trade’; Andrea Ciampani, *La Cisl tra integrazione europea e mondializzazione* (Rome: Edizioni Lavoro, 2000). For a discussion on this point from a political science perspective, Bengt Larsson, ‘Trade Union Channels for Influencing European Policies’, *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies* 5, no. 3 (2015): 101–21; Martin Seeliger, *Trade Unions in the Course of European Integration* (London: Routledge, 2019); Martin Seeliger and Johannes Kiess, ‘Trade Unions Under the Pressure of European Integration’, in *Trade Union and European Integration*, eds. Johannes M. Kiess and Martin Seeliger (London: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>14</sup>For more, n. 9 and Anthony Carew, ‘The Schism Within the World Federation of Trade Unions Government and Trade-Union Diplomacy’, *IRSH* 29, no. 3 (1984): 297–335.

<sup>15</sup>Colin Beever, *European Unity and the Trade Union Movements* (Leiden: A.W. Sythoff, 1960); Kristine Mitchell, ‘From Whitehall to Brussels: Thatcher, Delors and the Europeanization of the TUC’, *Labor History* 52, no. 1 (2012): 25–50.

<sup>16</sup>Pasture, ‘Trade’, 110.

<sup>17</sup>Richard Hyman, ‘British Trade Unions and the ETUC’, in *National Trade Unions and the ETUC*, eds. Andrea Ciampani and Pierre Tilly (Brussels: ETUI, 2017).

<sup>18</sup>Pasture, ‘Trade’, 115.

<sup>19</sup>Robert J. Lieber, *British Politics and European Unity* (Berkeley, CA: UC Press, 1970), 43.

The aim here is not to pretend that union internationalism eluded many of the structural challenges identified above. Nor will it deny that at critical junctures in the integration process Western Europe's union centres were divided over the basic form and function such unity ought to take. But what it will seek to do is understand why the TUC and its European retainues, knowing full well the frustrations that international unionism could bring, nonetheless continued to engage with one another when responding to the integration schemes of the 1950s. It is here that a transnational approach offers a timely framework of analysis. For, as the editors of this volume make clear, it is a structure that allows us better to understand the interdependency between the national and international realms. By concentrating so singly on the failure of union centres to shake their commitment to the nation state and formulate robust common policies at the European level, the historian runs the risk of denying the diverse incentives that continue to lay behind frequent, intense trade union interaction and the potential benefits this might well have brought. That no common trade union platform from which to influence the wider course of European unity materialised, in other words, did not necessarily mean such contact was worthless.

In so arguing, the article concentrates on TUC policy with relation to the FTA and EFTA. Our understanding of the TUC's approach to European affairs in this period is still fairly undeveloped.<sup>20</sup> Most works, led by Paul Teague's authoritative if now dated study, concentrate on its vacillating attitude following British EEC entry in 1973.<sup>21</sup> Thanks to Thomas Fetzer and Gerard Strange we do admittedly have a better sense of policies dating back to 1961, when Britain first applied to join.<sup>22</sup> But the years leading to this moment are no less significant. Quite the contrary in fact: the FTA marked the first real British attempt to respond to the reality of the Six as a political and economic unit, and correspondingly obliged the TUC to respond in kind. The 1950s were thus a formative moment for the TUC, trade union transnationalism and West European relations. The opening section of the article must therefore briefly trace the TUC's unfolding view of European integration from the opening of the decade and the possible benefits accrued by engaging transnationally as part of this evolution. This should introduce a recurring theme: that amid the various spats and misunderstandings lay the chance to liaise with, learn from and indeed lobby other centres – and perhaps in turn their governments – all of which saw the international trade union machinery transform into a sort of informal diplomatic arena in its own right. It then goes on to consider how the TUC and its counterparts, sometimes ineptly and not without consequences, sought to put this into effect during the FTA negotiations, before finally analysing the growing relevance of trade union action during the birth of EFTA in 1959–1960. Throughout it draws on the papers of the ERO and ICFTU housed in International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam and the TUC's own collection at the Modern Records Centre in Warwick.

## 1. TUC European policy at the start of the 1950s

At first sight, the TUC's view of European integration appears remarkably straightforward. Most fundamental was its principled opposition to supranationalism. The GC thus considered it all but impossible to support full British inclusion in the Schuman Plan which in July 1952 saw the Six

<sup>20</sup>Pasture, 'Trade' and Kaiser, *Using* both reference the TUC and EFTA but given the time span covered inevitably do so superficially, and Pasture conflates the FTA with EFTA. Reference is also made by Magaly Rodríguez García in 'Constructing Labour Regionalism in Europe and the Americas, 1920s–1970s', *IRSH* 58 (2013): 39–70, and *Liberal Workers of the World, Unite? The ICFTU and the Defence of Labour Liberalism* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010).

<sup>21</sup>Paul Teague, 'The British TUC and the European Community', *Millennium* 18, no. 1 (1989): 29–45; Paul Teague and John Grahl, *Industrial Relations and European Integration* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1992). Also Ben Rosamond, 'National Labour Organisation and European Integration: British Trade Unions and "1992"', *Political Studies* 41, no. 3 (1993): 420–34; Gerard Strange, 'British Trade Unions and European Integration in the 1990s', *Political Studies* 50, no. 2 (2002): 332–53; Philip B. Whyman, 'British Trade Unions, the 1975 European Referendum and Its Legacy', *Labor History* 49, no. 1 (2008): 23–45.

<sup>22</sup>Thomas Fetzer, 'Turning Eurosceptic: British Trade Unions and European Integration (1961–75)', *Journal of European Integration History* 13, no. 2 (2007): 85–101; Gerard Strange, 'British Trade Unions and the European Union from the 1960s', *Capital & Class* 93 (2007): 233–53.

pool their coal and steel resources under the aegis of the ECSC, the putative idea for a specialised agency to integrate European agriculture – the so-called Green Pool – or the later Messina conference.<sup>23</sup> Behind this attitude in part lay the conviction that Whitehall was best placed to plan the economy, achieve full employment and improve living standards. But doubtless mixed in with this was a supercilious strand to TUC thinking. One internal document penned by its Economic Committee, indeed, was quite candid in arguing that a supranational regulatory organ like the ECSC's High Authority contained 'reactionary governments' with considerable influence. Handing these administrations control over 'Britain's economic fortunes and social progress' meant tolerating the equalisation of wages and working conditions with countries thought of as maintaining 'inferior' standards. Not only British workers but Britain's entire industrial base were hence deemed likely to suffer.<sup>24</sup>

Economic trends served merely to confirm such logic. The two sectors initially concerned (coal and steel) were both indispensable to the UK economy. And the latter was protected by relatively high tariffs. Joining a common market in steel thus raised legitimate questions about adequate protection for home producers and the potential effect of dumping.<sup>25</sup> Contrastingly, a managed market for agriculture as foreseen by the Green Pool was of limited appeal to British producers, most of whom did not sell to the continent and were already sheltered by low tariff duties.<sup>26</sup> Complicating both was Britain's Commonwealth ties. As with the wider labour movement, this linkage would remain a political and moral reference point for the TUC.<sup>27</sup> As might be expected, though, the Economic Committee adopted a more pecuniary attitude when assessing its merits vis-à-vis European integration. Such an exercise tended to prioritise the existing system of Imperial Preference which offered UK and Commonwealth exporters privileged reciprocal market access. Any alternation in tariffs, so the TUC believed, would inevitably disturb this balance to the detriment of living expenses. It might even leave Britain unable to fulfil its long-term and bulk purchase contracts in the Commonwealth, which in the early 1950s took three-fifths of Britain's entire output.<sup>28</sup> That against this backdrop the TUC would respond wholly positively to the Six's plans was thus always unlikely.

On closer inspection, however, the TUC's stance seems to have been rather more measured than this assessment implies. This is especially striking when considering the choice to make no formal pronouncement explicitly rejecting either the Schuman Plan or the Green Pool.<sup>29</sup> Tellingly, perhaps, the GC also refrained from taking too critical a line at the TUC's annual conferences, General Secretary Vincent Tewson instead telling delegates it was aware of and carefully monitoring developments across the English Channel.<sup>30</sup> And it was also reflected in the complex response of the sectoral unions concerned: the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) – one of the 'big six' unions affiliated to the TUC whose president sat on the GC – and the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC). More than a few historians have taken Labour Deputy Leader Herbert Morrison's oft-quoted declaration that 'the Durham miners won't wear it' to mean the government on which he served was unable to sanction participation in the ECSC thanks largely to the opposition of the NUM.<sup>31</sup> To

<sup>23</sup>On the Green Pool, Richard T. Griffiths, and Brian Girvin, eds., *The Green Pool and the Origins of the Common Agricultural Policy* (London: Lothian, 1995); Kiran Patel, ed., *Fertile Ground for Europe?* (Nomos: Baden-Baden, 2009).

<sup>24</sup>'The European Coal and Steel Community', Econ.Ctee. 1/2, 13 October 1954, MSS.292/564.9/1, Modern Records Centre, Warwick [henceforth MRC].

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Untitled note, 25 September 1952, and 'The "Green Pool" for European Agriculture', undated, both MSS.292/564.9/4, MRC.

<sup>27</sup>For more, D.I. Davis, 'The Politics of the TUC's Colonial Policy', *The Political Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (1964): 23–34; R.M. Douglas, *The Labour Party, Nationalism and Internationalism 1939–1951* (London: Routledge, 2004); Billy Frank, Craig Horner, and David Stewart, eds., *The British Labour Movement and Imperialism* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2010).

<sup>28</sup>'Economic Association with Western Europe (II)', Econ.Ctee. 2/1, 23 October 1956, MSS.292/564.7/1, MRC.

<sup>29</sup>'The European Coal and Steel Community', Econ.Ctee. 1/2, 13 October 1954, MSS.292/564.9/1, MRC.

<sup>30</sup>See i.e. TUC, *Annual Congress Report* (London: TUC, 1952), 393; TUC, *Annual Congress Report* (London: TUC, 1954), 401–3.

<sup>31</sup>Examples include Geoffrey Fry, *The Politics of Decline* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2005), 87; Stephen George, *An Awkward Partner* (Oxford: OUP, 1998), 20; Kenneth O. Morgan, *Labour in Power, 1945–51* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), 420; Michael Williams, *Crisis and Consensus in British Politics* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 179; John Young, *Britain, France and the Unity of Europe 1945–51* (Leicester: LUP, 1984), 156.

some extent they are right to do so: after all, the London-based Miners' Trade Union International, of which the NUM was its largest delegate, had claimed the ECSC represented a 'monstrous plan of the armament manufacturers'.<sup>32</sup> What this belies however is the restraint key union leaders increasingly displayed in private.<sup>33</sup> Spurred on by a desire to shape the nascent ECSC, for example, the NUM used the platform provided by its membership of the GC to win a seat on Britain's permanent delegation to the High Authority.<sup>34</sup> A better indication came when NUM president Will Lawther hinted support for British participation in the Schuman Plan on the proviso that British miners' standard of living would remain intact.<sup>35</sup> A more constructive trade union attitude could therefore be expected to follow.

Translated into policy this meant the TUC grew convinced, already well before the FTA proposal came to light, that Britain could ill afford completely to detach itself from the arrangements being established by the Six. The first major testing ground for this realisation had been the decision to welcome Britain's association agreement with the ECSC signed in December 1954. It is true admittedly that TUC backing was not without qualification; many of the qualms relating to supranationalism, full employment and the Commonwealth had not simply disappeared.<sup>36</sup> But even a cursory glance at TUC documents reveal an organisation overawed by the ECSC High Authority's ability within just a few years to increase both the output and efficiency of the Six's coal and steel production. That the Economic Committee became certain the Six in the long run could grow self-sufficient in both sectors – with the ensuing risk that they might sell their surplus product abroad and undercut British exporters in third (and especially Commonwealth) markets – was further advanced as a reason for British association.<sup>37</sup> Much like the Green Pool proposal with which the GC had earlier also urged (before its decline into relative obscurity) Britain to associate, there were strong political elements colouring this response.<sup>38</sup> For union officials appear to have been rather less convinced than the British Government of the time that the Six were unlikely to endure as a coherent bloc or that indifference to their various endeavours was an acceptable response. Quite the reverse in fact: members of the TUC, while doubtless predisposed to finding an intergovernmental route for managing European trade, were highly cognisant of the determination with which some in the Six hoped to replicate elsewhere the supranational infrastructure of the ECSC.<sup>39</sup> This trend if left unchecked was then forecast to result in a host of decisions that 'inevitably touch our interests' being taken regardless of whether Britain actually participated.<sup>40</sup> Rather than pouring cold water on any new schemes propping up on the continent, the GC thus came gradually to advocate Britain influence them from the outset.<sup>41</sup>

This would dictate TUC attitudes to the Messina process and the FTA. To be sure, there were those who wished the GC would go further and entertain Britain contributing fully to the Six's negotiations for a common market and customs union. Lawther was one of five trade unionists who in mid-1956 signed a 'statement on a European common market' pressing for Britain's 'direct cooperation and participation' in order to 'make our voice heard and work for a treaty which will

<sup>32</sup>Miners' Trade Union International, 'For a 15th of November Action Against the Schuman Plan', undated, MSS.292/564.9/1, MRC.

<sup>33</sup>See 'Relations with the ECSC, Econ.Ctee. 1/4, 19 October 1955, and 'Notes of Meeting with Committee of 21', August 1955, both MSS.292/564.9/2, MRC; 'Note of Meeting with Representatives of the Steel Industry', 24 July 1952, MSS.292/564.9/1; Norman Brook, 'Franco-German Steel and Coal Authority: Economic Implications', 11 May 1950, PREM 8/1428, UK National Archives [henceforth TNA].

<sup>34</sup>GC minutes, 20 August 1952, MSS.292/20/37, MRC.

<sup>35</sup>Edmund Dell, *The Schuman Plan and the British Abdication of Leadership in Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 168-9; Douglas, *Labour Party*, 263.

<sup>36</sup>'ECSC Agreement with the United Kingdom', Econ.Ctee. 4/5, 12 January 1955, MSS.292/564.9/1, MRC.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>International Committee minutes, 21 October 1952, MSS.292/901/10, MRC.

<sup>39</sup>Dann to Tewson, 3 October 1952, MSS.292/564.9/4, MRC; GC minutes, 4 September 1952, MSS.292/20/37, MRC; Charles Geddes, 'Trade Unions and a European Community', 28 January 1955, MSS.292/564.2/3, MRC; 'Summary Report: 11th ERO Economic Committee', 3-4 May 1957, International Confederation of Free Trade Union Archives [henceforth ICFTU] 1287, International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam [henceforth IISH]. On the British Government's position, among others, Ellison, *Threatening*.

<sup>40</sup>'Political Aspects of Economic Association with Europe', 15 October 1956, MSS.292/564.7/1, MRC.

<sup>41</sup>See i.e. Tewson to Eden, 4 November 1952, MSS.292/564.9/4, MRC.

bring great prosperity'.<sup>42</sup> Simultaneously there existed a group of trade unionists resistant to any hint of a more substantive economic cooperation with the continent.<sup>43</sup> In this light, the FTA, formally announced by the British Government in 26 November, was considered a neat 'half-way house' which promised to resolve several dilemmas at once.<sup>44</sup> As originally conceived, the absence of food-stuffs, feeding-stuffs, drink and tobacco from an otherwise industrial grouping was unlikely to infringe Britain's Commonwealth and sterling area connections. The institutional nature of the FTA, drawing on the framework of the intergovernmental Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), would, as a preliminary Economic Committee report speculated, likely guard against a 'loss of sovereignty and control of our own tariff' while tackling the fact that the Six's plans 'present British industries with a serious dilemma'. It was, the note continued, 'idle to discuss whether it is good or bad as Britain has no means of preventing it. What is to be decided is whether any steps can be taken either to mitigate its disadvantages'.<sup>45</sup> The FTA appeared perfectly to fit the bill.

## 2. The benefits of trade union transnationalism

All this took place against a backdrop of various meetings and conversations with the TUC's fellow confederations. That these sorts of exchanges were even available, though, was never guaranteed. Europe's trade unions had doubtless emerged from the Second World War with a strong emotional commitment to the ideals of European unity and international cohesion.<sup>46</sup> Yet broader geopolitical developments and, closer to home, internal wrangling over the scope and character of trade union cooperation, tested severely their commitment to this pledge. The cold war rupture from which the ICFTU emerged was arguably the most clear-cut example of what some, perhaps a tad histrionically, have called the 'myth of labour unity'.<sup>47</sup> There was likewise no shortage of friction and mistrust within the ERO. Inevitably, perhaps, this pattern of behaviour spilt over into early discussions on the integration process. One quite intense debate concerned the best forum to represent trade union interests in the nascent ECSC. This pitted the TUC, its Austrian and Scandinavian counterparts, and even a few union confederations from the Six – who urged the ERO be given precedence since the pooling of coal and steel resources concerned European peace *in toto* – against the sectoral miners and metalworkers unions who tended to see the ECSC as largely their preserve.<sup>48</sup> The final result, with the Six union centres sitting alongside their respective sectoral unions in a new organ, the so-called Committee of 21, appeared yet further confirmation of the practical difficulties of trade union transnationalism.

But the mere fact that these tensions existed did not in itself render union interaction futile. On the contrary, the TUC seems to have understood that as the integration process intensified, union cooperation presented it with a number of distinct advantages. For a start it offered the chance to secure a British voice in discussions on a subject widely considered as fundamental to the future of Europe. Early on therefore the TUC expressed a 'direct interest' in trade union talks on the various continental schemes and publicised its desire to sit on the ICFTU's Schuman Plan Committee and the ERO's Trade Union Advisory Committee on the Green Pool.<sup>49</sup> Conversely a fear of isolation

<sup>42</sup>'Statement on European Common Market', June 1956, MSS.292/564.7/1, MRC. The others were Jim Campbell, Charles Geddes, Florence Hancock and Sam Watson.

<sup>43</sup>GC minutes, 2 November 1956, MSS.292.564.7/1, MRC.

<sup>44</sup>For the announcement, Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons (26 November 1956), Vol. 561, Cols. 35–55.

<sup>45</sup>'Economic Association with Europe', Econ.Ctee. 1/6, 10 October 1956, MSS.292/564.7/1, MRC. Policy was publicly outlined in 'Economic Association for Europe', 2 November 1956, European Trade Union Confederation Archives [henceforth ETUC] 301, IISH.

<sup>46</sup>Pasture, 'Trade', 109–10.

<sup>47</sup>Pasture, 'Window'.

<sup>48</sup>García, *Liberal*, 250-2; Pasture, 'Flight', 84–5.

<sup>49</sup>TUC Economic Committee minutes, July 1950, MSS.292/564.9/1, MRC. See also ICFTU, 'Report on the Schuman Plan Committee', 13–15 September 1950, ICFTU 338, IISH. TUC, 'Summarised Report of ICFTU Conference', I.C. 2/1, 16 December 1950, MSS.292/564.9/1, MRC, MSS.292/564.9/1, MRC.



from European politics probably explains why the formation of the Committee of 21 was the cause of such consternation within the General Council.<sup>50</sup> And this same strand of thinking also accounts for why, as Britain prepared later to associate with the ECSC, the TUC should have moved immediately to safeguard British representation on the Committee.<sup>51</sup> Britain's broader ambivalence towards European unity, in other words, did not preclude the TUC from seeking its own say on developments.

The second possible benefit sprang from the fact that the international trade union machinery was a ready-made instrument through which the TUC could expand its awareness of continental politics. Various ICFTU and ERO gatherings furnished TUC representatives with insight as to, for example, the executive powers of the High Authority, the scope of the Committee of 21 effectively to press the case for labour rights, and the perceived impact of supranational cooperation on the domestic economies of the Six. Just how profitable this information could be was well recognised by Charles Geddes, a senior GC member who sat on the ERO's ruling Executive Committee. Speaking at a meeting about accession to the Committee of 21, he contended that 'if the British trade union movement was to learn anything about integration this was an opportunity of investigating it in concrete form'.<sup>52</sup> Knowledge as well as access were thus key motivations.

Third and arguably more significant, this networking could act as an arena in which to lobby and directly engage other unions on the issue of integration. Despite, or perhaps because of, the rifts mentioned above, trade unionists periodically admitted that for the sake of both European unionism and unity they ought to do more to find common ground, even if this risked compromise decisions of the lowest common denominator type.<sup>53</sup> Pressure for the TUC and others to 'join the action in favour of Europe' also featured prominently in successive ERO meetings.<sup>54</sup> Crucially, such appeals did at times move beyond the rhetorical towards the more operational level. It would be a stretch of course to argue that these various gatherings convinced the TUC completely to reverse its views of supranationalism. But it is possible to draw a connection between the wider commitment to union camaraderie and, for example, the subsequent decision by the TUC to abstain rather than oppose outright ERO motions welcoming the supranational aspects of the ECSC and the Green Pool.<sup>55</sup> Further confirmation these pleas carried weight came when, in considering the TUC's approach to the pending UK-ECSC association agreement, the Economic Committee conceded 'we should not overlook the importance which the free trade unions in the Community attach to [the] ECSC, or their desire to see Britain associated with it'.<sup>56</sup> And a certain trade union consciousness also had a hand in the TUC's approach towards the FTA, support for which could well have the additional effect of 'unifying the trade union movements to a greater degree than at present'.<sup>57</sup> It was perfectly reasonable therefore to imagine a scenario where the TUC would hope to put the ERO/ICFTU framework to similarly useful effect.

### 3. How to solve a problem like the FTA

Against this backdrop there was consequently nothing unusual about a situation in which the TUC sought contact with other union centres as it began to examine the implications of the FTA proposal. Quite how valuable these links might well prove became apparent over the winter and spring of 1956/57 when the TUC's initial enthusiasm for the FTA concept was counterbalanced by a fuller awareness both of the intrinsic complexity of negotiating an agreement of this type and the potential

<sup>50</sup>García, 'Constructing', 62–3.

<sup>51</sup>'Summarised Report of Meeting', Econ.Ctee. (Special) 1/1, 9 August 1955, MSS.292/564.9/2, MRC.

<sup>52</sup>Minutes of meeting with Committee of 21, August 1955, MSS.292/564.9/2, MRC.

<sup>53</sup>'Report on Conference', 22–24 May 1956, ETUC 8, IISH.

<sup>54</sup>'Trade Union Conference on the Revival of the European Idea', 25–27 August 1955, ETUC 270, IISH.

<sup>55</sup>Alf Dann would speak of 'friendliness and comradeship' driving consideration of the Green Pool, see Dann to Tewson, 3 October 1952, MSS.292/564.9/4, MRC.

<sup>56</sup>TUC Economic Committee minutes, 13 October 1954, MSS.292/564.9/1, MRC.

<sup>57</sup>Joint Committee minutes, 2 November 1956, MSS.292/20/41, MRC.

costs to Britain. In the UK alone it was predicted the FTA would precipitate job losses in high-tariff industries such as cotton, rayon, watches, clocks, scientific and optical equipment, as well as consumer goods like boots, shoes, glassware, gloves, and toys.<sup>58</sup> So extensive were the array of sectors involved that it would oblige the British Government not only to establish protective measures for each but also to agree with other FTA signatories a favourable transition period in order to guard against major upheavals in employment. But TUC concerns ranged well beyond the somewhat dry, technical problems of industrial tariffs. Delicate topics covering everything from the movement of capital and labour – which brought with it the prospect of Europe-wide harmonisation of social policies on displaced workpeople, unemployment pay and retraining – to support for underdeveloped regions were all likely to be up for debate. And in each case it made a great deal of sense, as the TUC did in earnest from the end of 1956, to sound out the views of fellow union centres and grasp the likely position of their respective governments.<sup>59</sup>

The GC was further notified of the potential merits of European trade unionism by the publication in February 1957 of the British white paper confirming plans for the FTA. Several aspects of the document made for uncomfortable reading from the TUC's viewpoint. Among them was the document's silence on both unfair trading and competition and the degree to which governments facing acute balance of payments difficulties might be able to introduce temporary trade restrictions. Most problematic, though, was the section on full employment. Since at least the 1930s the TUC had insisted that the best route to social equality and improved living standards was the guarantee of jobs for (virtually) all workers. It was entirely natural that the TUC would therefore want to push for an FTA treaty to delineate in specific terms the action which member states would be required to undertake as they worked towards this aim. But far from doing so, the Government's white paper did little more than recognise the general notion of full employment and offer to place a rather hazy statement on the subject into the preamble of any future text.<sup>60</sup> Even in the short-term this oversight appeared to have serious repercussions. For in January 1957 officials in the British Treasury had resolved informally to consult the GC throughout the course of the talks; the simple fact that TUC had at the first hurdle apparently failed to exert the necessary leverage did not augur well for the future.<sup>61</sup> It was the long-term ramifications however, and in particular the increased likelihood that the whole concept of full employment might somehow fall by the wayside as the FTA began to function, which most troubled TUC leaders. As one union researcher put it: 'To convince the British Government to write a general provision on cooperation to maintain full employment into a treaty is one thing; to ensure that other governments take appropriate action to translate it into fact may be another'.<sup>62</sup> Some additional formula would hence be needed to 'keep governments under pressure' and ensure necessary momentum behind the full employment concept was sustained.<sup>63</sup> Here, again, union activism seemed to offer opportunities.

All that being the case, the TUC's inclination was to convene an ERO special conference designed to undertake 'a thorough examination' of the FTA proposal and its impact on 'the national economies of the countries concerned and on the position of the workers in them'.<sup>64</sup> When doing so, however, the TUC had at least one additional objective in mind. For it well understood that this presented an ideal opportunity to appeal to those centres from beyond the Six who were likewise highly sceptical about aspects of the FTA proposal. Denmark's Confederation of Trade Unions (*De samvirkende*

<sup>58</sup>'First Progress Report', 29 January 1957, MSS.292/564.7/1, MRC; 'Comments on the UK Memorandum to OEEC', Econ.Ctee. 8/1, 13 March 1957, MSS.292/564.7/2, MRC.

<sup>59</sup>'Summary Report: 10th ERO Economic Committee', 4–5 December 1956, ICFTU 1286, IISH; Tewson to ERO centres, 21 February 1957, MSS.292/564.74/1, MRC; 'Second Progress Report', Econ.Ctee. 8/3, 13 March 1957, MSS.292/564.7/2, MRC.

<sup>60</sup>Memorandum to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, 14 March 1957, ETUC 272, IISH.

<sup>61</sup>'Arrangements for Informal Contact', 16 January 1957, MSS.292/564.7/1, MRC. The first meeting took place a fortnight later, see HM Treasury, 'Consultation with TUC', 30 January 1957, MSS.292/564.7/1, MRC.

<sup>62</sup>'First Progress Report', 29 January 1957, MSS.292/564.7/1, MRC.

<sup>63</sup>'Comments on the UK Memorandum to OEEC', Econ.Ctee. 8/1, 13 March 1957, MSS.292/564.7/2, MRC.

<sup>64</sup>International Committee minutes, 30 April 1957, MSS.292/901/13, MRC; Schevenels to ERO centres, 17 April 1957, ICFTU 2254, IISH.

*Fagforbund*, DSF) caused the most unease. Few doubted that either the DSF or Denmark's ruling social democrats much preferred the looser political structure of the FTA. Where the proposal floundered was in the dearth of provision for agriculture, exports of which accounted for over half of Danish trade but, because of the Commonwealth, both the British Government and TUC insisted ought to be excluded. The full implications of this were spelt out in a letter to Tewson from DSF chair Eiler Jensen in March 1957. It was, Jensen insisted, 'of decisive importance for Denmark that the agricultural problems are taken up as an integral part of this new initiative'. Otherwise not only would Denmark's joining the FTA be thrown into doubt but, in the name of Scandinavian unity, so too might that of Norway and Sweden.<sup>65</sup>

Much hope was therefore entrusted to the extraordinary ERO conference of 16–17 May 1957. In the event, however, this proved to be hugely misplaced. The five-strong TUC delegation certainly came prepared, having prior to the event sent around a report outlining the various difficulties upon which it sought to concentrate.<sup>66</sup> But the lamenting tone of the document, combined at the conference with the somewhat ill-chosen tenor of those who introduced it – Wilfred Heywood seems inadvertently to have insulted some delegates when claiming the FTA was proof that European cooperation could be 'realised without political unity in the form of a Federal Europe' – did little to endear either the TUC paper or the FTA concept to those present. Palpable among the ECSC unions at least was the not entirely mistaken feeling that the free trade proposal was a British ploy to scupper the recently signed Treaty of Rome. It was Robert Bothereau, the general secretary of the French confederation (*Confédération Générale du Travail-Force Ouvrière*, CGT-FO), who subsequently suggested that the ERO use the months ahead to ensure governments of the Six ratify the new treaty rather than concern itself with a proposal which simply 'raised special problems of a more technical nature'. Others were quick to state the impossibility of their supporting a project which appeared so squarely designed to meet British, indeed TUC, needs, pointing to both the GC's refusal even to consider discussing agricultural trade and the paucity of solutions to assist those parts of the continent dogged by low wages and income disparities. By contrast, there was a certain exasperation with what the TUC *did* seem to prioritise. Most forthright in this regard was Ludwig Rosenberg of the German Trade Union Federation (*Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund*, DGB), whose lengthy mauling of the TUC paper saw him complain that European integration went 'well beyond' the topic of full employment. So acrimonious did the ensuing discussion prove that by the close of proceedings the French, German and Belgian delegates had to be persuaded from insisting that mention of the FTA be struck from the conference resolution. Even then, the best the TUC could come away with was reference to ERO members having merely 'considered' its document since 'many still felt unable to give their full support to some of the views expressed in it'.<sup>67</sup>

Nor did relations improve over the following months. Part of the problem was the basic incompatibility between what the TUC wished to see in the FTA treaty and the goals of its European equivalents. When faced, for instance, with the suggestion that it ought to change tack on agriculture in order to appease the DSF and gain support from unions elsewhere, the GC paid the necessary lip-service but quickly reverted to form.<sup>68</sup> Presentation of the TUC's case also left much to be desired. As the May meeting had demonstrated, and as a string of later gatherings would likewise reveal, homing in on those issues which most obviously concerned the TUC alerted other national centres as to whether there was much actual value to a free trade grouping.<sup>69</sup> Without doing anything in the

<sup>65</sup>Jensen to Tewson, 5 March 1957, MSS.292/564.74/1, MRC.

<sup>66</sup>'The European Free Area', ERC/CES.11/6, 24 April 1957, ICFTU 1318, IISH. The delegation comprised Geddes, Heywood, Frank Cousins, Len Murray and W. Ernest Jones.

<sup>67</sup>All quotes from 'Summary Report', 16–17 May 1957, ICFTU 1318, IISH. For the resolution, 'Resolution on the Free Trade Area', 16 May 1957, ETUC 300, IISH.

<sup>68</sup>'Food and the FTA', Econ.Ctee. 1/1, 9 October 1957, MSS.292/564.7/2, MRC.

<sup>69</sup>'Item for Agenda: The FTA', 8 March 1958, ETUC 230, IISH.

intervening months to ward off such sentiments, the TUC managed to evoke in a good number of its counterparts an inauspicious mixture of irritation and indifference towards the FTA.<sup>70</sup>

Two developments in late 1957/early 1958 served to dampen the mood further. The first of these, in echoes of the Committee of 21 controversy, was the decision by the Six's union centres to dispense with the facilities of the ERO and found instead an entirely separate organisation – the European Trade Union Secretariat (ETUS) – to represent their interests in the EEC. Edmund Wyss, the Secretary of the Swiss Trade Union Confederation (*Schweizerischer Gewerkschaftsbund*, SGB), perhaps best surmised the challenge when he alleged the venture would 'lead to a disintegration of the European trade union movement, which would run counter to European economic integration. The very existence of the ERO was threatened'.<sup>71</sup> And the second concerned the lack of headway the TUC had made in convincing the British Government to adopt a more a robust statement on full employment. The case for doing so had been pressed with vigour during the numerous exchanges with Treasury civil servants and Reginald Maudling, the Paymaster-General and chief British negotiator for the FTA.<sup>72</sup> And yet it became customary for TUC appeals to be met with Whitehall obstinacy, to the point that one decidedly heated meeting was brought to a premature end following the outburst by Alan Birch, the chair of the Economic Committee, that he could 'not understand why' the Government refused to give way.<sup>73</sup>

Alone, either one of these would have unnerved the TUC. In combination, however, they forced the TUC to undergo a period of intense soul-searching which led inextricably to a dramatic change in tactics. Among these was something of a presentational rethink. This can be traced back to a memorandum prepared by Don Bowers, a researcher who had risen to become Secretary of the TUC's International Committee. With 'the chances of the FTA [...] less than 50-50', Bowers opined, 'the time has come to take a more positive attitude towards it'. And while this did 'not mean abandoning the safeguards we have called for [...] it does perhaps require the recognition that the bargaining position of Britain is not all that strong and that certain concessions may have to be made'.<sup>74</sup> Quite how this would work in practice was then fleshed out by the GC three weeks later. Gone was the focus on the conditionality of TUC support. In its place would come an 'emphasis in the ERO [...] on the advantages of an association of [the] EEC with Britain and other European countries, and the disadvantages to the Six and their trade unions of failing to associate'. If, the GC reckoned, 'this broad approach is accepted, the aim should be to secure the support of European trade union centres for demonstrably trade union objectives'. This might compel the TUC to reconcile its own preferences with those of other unions. But it would also yield an opportune moment to 'reintroduce the concept of an effective full employment programme' by highlighting that 'trade unions of the Six had been unable to secure any detailed guarantee in the Rome Treaty, which makes only very general reference to the level of employment'. With the British Government seemingly reticent on a full employment clause, this last point seemed especially pertinent. For the GC had grown firmly of the mind that 'further insistence by the TUC alone [...] will not by itself induce a more forthcoming response'. It was accordingly

of first importance to secure continental trade union support, first to press for a more precise recognition of government obligations in this field and second to press full employment policies actively as a continuing objective in whatever institutions are available.<sup>75</sup>

With little time to spare, the TUC threw itself into pursuing these goals with zeal. An early pointer came as union centres prepared once again to meet at the ERO's annual conference, a TUC discussion paper extolling the virtues of the FTA as a chance to build a consumer market comparable in

<sup>70</sup>Report of JTUAC to OEEC, I.C. 5/3, 27 February 1958, MSS.292/901/4, MRC.

<sup>71</sup>Summary Report: 13th Executive Committee', 8 March 1958, ETUC 230, IISH.

<sup>72</sup>See folder MSS.292/564.71/3, MRC.

<sup>73</sup>'Report of Meeting with Paymaster-General', Econ.Ctee. 14/1, MSS.292/564.7/3, MRC.

<sup>74</sup>Bowers to Murray, 15 April 1958, MSS.292/564.74/1, MRC.

<sup>75</sup>Note for Biennial Conference of ERO', Econ.Ctee. 11/3, 7 May 1958, MSS.292/564.7/3, MRC.

size to the United States and the Soviet Union and which, rather uncharacteristically, choosing to relegate mention of full employment to the third page.<sup>76</sup> A letter sent to Commonwealth unions and copied to the ERO meanwhile appeared to indicate a greater openness on including agriculture.<sup>77</sup> Public change of tone persisted at the conference, with ever more weight being laid on the prospects of the FTA vanquishing the ‘less pleasing’ aspects of the Rome Treaty and ‘improving social justice and of removing poverty’. At first, though, it was doubtful whether such optimistic declamations would make much difference. Some clearly were more amenable. One Italian delegate even cautioned that unions ought to ‘avoid giving the impression that there were people in favour and people against the Free Trade Area’. But positive noises were overshadowed by those lining up to censure the FTA or the TUC’s stance on it.<sup>78</sup> And yet as would become explicit in the following months, this approach did usher in a not especially radical but no less meaningful alteration in the pattern of union behaviour, marked by a shift from simply critiquing the FTA to instead aspiring to ‘reach a common attitude as to which concrete and detailed social claims [unions] will make for the drafting of the Free Trade Area treaty’.<sup>79</sup>

It helped of course that partisans of union comradeship came to recognise that the matter ought, one way or another, to be resolved.<sup>80</sup> So too did the dynamics alter slightly thanks to the decision by other non-Six unions – notably the Austrian trade union federation (*Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund*, OGB) – to adopt a more activist presence. Subsequent ERO gatherings thus became more solidly multilateral affairs rather than ones dominated by the TUC.<sup>81</sup> And perhaps the most fruitful act was that of establishing expert commissions to examine more controversial subjects like agriculture and transport. Tensions deescalated as a result.<sup>82</sup> Whatever the precise blend, the effect was an intense if at times still acerbic period of union negotiation which by the autumn of 1958 had resulted in a degree of consensus inconceivable just months earlier. No one single public policy document, admittedly, was to emerge espousing an overarching trade union vision for the FTA.<sup>83</sup> The TUC was also alone in continuing to exhort national governments be given enough wiggle room to formulate and execute an agricultural policy of their choosing. Other points of disagreement – relating both to agriculture (subsidies) and other areas (movement of labour, intra-European payments, and institutions like a common investment bank) – likewise remained. Sign of quite how far the GC position had otherwise advanced however was confirmed in its backing a motion calling for agricultural trade ‘as far as practicable’ to be included in the FTA agreement, accepting in principle both a formal process of confrontation and a complaints procedure to monitor the impact on FTA and third (Commonwealth) countries.<sup>84</sup> Agreement was also on the horizon when it came to the rules of competition, with unions urging any treaty establish safeguards against cartels, dumping and discrimination in favour of domestic industries.<sup>85</sup> Breakthrough too was nearing on aid for underdeveloped regions and the creation of a social fund charged with publishing employment opportunities, assisting in placing workers, compensating for job losses, and coordinating vocational

<sup>76</sup> ‘Trade Union Position with regard to the Free Trade Area’, 20 March 1958, ICFTU 1312, IISH.

<sup>77</sup> Tewson to union centres, 29 May 1958, ICFTU 2554, IISH.

<sup>78</sup> ‘Report on Conference’, 12 May 1958, ETUC 10, IISH.

<sup>79</sup> ‘Overview of Meeting’, 9–11 June 1958, ETUC 300, IISH.

<sup>80</sup> See comments in ‘Report of 13th ERO Economic Committee Meeting’, Econ.Ctee. 13/4, 9 July 1958, MSS.292/564.741/1, MRC;

‘13th Economic Committee Meeting: Summary of Conclusions’, ETUC 300, IISH.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*; ‘Statement by Austrian Centre on FTA’, 21 May 1958, ICFTU 1287, IISH; ‘14th ERO Economic Committee: Addendum to Document – Trade Union Viewpoints on the FTA’, 8 July 1958, ICFTU, 1287, IISH.

<sup>82</sup> ‘14th ERO Economic Committee: Summary Report’, 22 July 1958, ETUC 301, IISH.

<sup>83</sup> The closest they came was ‘Memorandum of Viewpoints and Conclusions Retained by the Free Trade Union Movement of Europe in respect of the Free Trade Area’, 9–11 June and 15–16 June 1958, ICFTU 1287, IISH.

<sup>84</sup> ‘Subjects for Discussion at 14th ERO Economic Committee Meeting’, Econ.Ctee. 13/6, MSS.292/564/71/1, MRC; ‘14th ERO Economic Committee: Summary Report’, 22 July 1958, ETUC 301, IISH; ‘Summary Record of Meeting held with Representatives of Non-Governmental Organisations’, 27 October 1958, ETUC 301, IISH. Proof of TUC concessions came when it asked for the decision ‘not to be rendered public’, see ‘16th ERO Economic Committee: Summary Report’, 6 January 1959, ICFTU 1281, IISH. Confrontation implied a member state could formally examine and criticise another’s domestic agricultural policies with a view gradually of reaching a common set of rules.

<sup>85</sup> ‘Rules of Competition in a Free Trade Area’, 21 October 1958, ICFTU 1287, IISH.

retraining. And perhaps most noticeable, unions would demand any text enshrine plans to meet full employment, with obligations for governments to regulate economies as required and report progress therein.<sup>86</sup>

Little wonder, then, that when reflecting on the foregoing months, a TUC report should note that ‘experience has shown it difficult to secure agreement with the European trade unions on a comprehensive scheme’ but that it ‘has been possible to secure a good measure of agreement in the ERO on the European trade union objectives which should find a place in any scheme for closer economic cooperation’.<sup>87</sup> This in itself suggests unions were at times able to put their parochialism aside if the right incentives and circumstances existed. Being able to converge around even a few common positions would also have a powerful knock-on effect. For it served massively to strengthen the hand of TUC officials and Walter Schevenels, as ERO General Secretary, who were able to present Maudling with conclusions behind which stood the force not just of one centre but all of Western Europe’s trade union confederations.<sup>88</sup> Whether this made any real impact on the state of the negotiations probably matters less than the fact that, first, union centres clearly thought it might and, second, they went to quite considerable length to reach compromise in order to do so. All the more unfortunate therefore that as a modicum of unanimity in union ranks should breakout, the French Government of Charles de Gaulle announced its intention to veto the FTA.

#### 4. Negotiating a smaller free trade area

International trade union reaction to the French statement of 14 November 1958 was swift. Just ten days later the ICFTU had issued a resolution expressing ‘concern’ at French actions and warning of a possible trade war.<sup>89</sup> And the ERO was likewise united in urging ‘that no effort be spared to bring about rapidly an agreement to the democratic nations of Europe ensuring fruitful cooperation for all in both the economic and the social field’.<sup>90</sup> All this very much echoed TUC thinking: the split between the EEC and those outside could not be allowed to become permanent. Rumours the British Government might wish to negotiate a smaller trade area were therefore met with caution. Economics alone meant an Anglo-Scandinavian grouping, perhaps with Austria, Switzerland and even Portugal in tow, appeared to make very little sense, as an initial review of the topic by the TUC surmised. After all, its combined population and total labour force would be less than half that of the Six, its economy some 60 per cent smaller, but its trade ties with the EEC worth about 40 per cent more than with each other. Any commercial pact was thus unlikely to ‘bind them into so coherent and powerful a group as the six of the Treaty of Rome’. The political justification also looked shaky, a new trade bloc expected to cement rather than ease divisions with the Six.<sup>91</sup> With EEC membership still out of the question, however, exactly how the GC foresaw Britain uniting with the continent remained unresolved.

Nothing suggested this state of affairs would change radically in the short term at least. Talks with Labour shortly before Christmas saw few ideas emerge.<sup>92</sup> The breakdown would also mark the beginning of a five-month hiatus in consultations with the Government.<sup>93</sup> Almost by default therefore union links emerged as the only real outlet through which to discuss Europe’s political logjam. Hence a meeting with Schevenels and Bothereau of the CGT-FO was hastily arranged with the aim of ‘obtaining a clear picture’ of France’s position and underlining ‘the TUC’s concern for

<sup>86</sup>Ibid.; ‘14th ERO Economic Committee: Summary Report’, 22 July 1958, ETUC 301, IISH.

<sup>87</sup>‘Eleventh Progress Report’ Econ.Cttee. 3/6, MSS.292/564.7/4, MRC.

<sup>88</sup>See i.e. ‘15th ERO Economic Committee: Summary Report’, 11–12 November 1958, ICFTU 1287, IISH; HM Treasury, ‘Consultation with TUC’, 17 September 1958, MSS.292/564.71/3, MRC.

<sup>89</sup>ICFTU, ‘Resolution on European Common Market and Free Trade Area’, 24–28 November 1958, ETUC 301, IISH.

<sup>90</sup>‘16th ERO Executive Committee: Resolution’, 7 January 1959, ETUC 19, IISH.

<sup>91</sup>‘Twelfth Progress Report’, Econ.Cttee. 4/6, 14 January 1959, MSS.292/564.7/4, MRC.

<sup>92</sup>‘Minutes of Joint Meeting with Labour’, 25 November 1958, and TUC Economic Committee minutes, 14 January 1959, both MSS.292/564.7/4, MRC.

<sup>93</sup>‘Report of Meeting’, Econ. Cttee. 8/2, 13 May 1959, MSS.292/564.7/4, MRC.

maintaining the unity of Europe' – from which surfaced a vow 'to consider what could be done to influence the French Government, French public opinion and the other trade unions centres of the Six along the lines of the TUC'.<sup>94</sup> Effort was then put in at the ERO level to mull where governments might go next, with an ECSC-type association and a series of bilateral treaties drafted to mimic the FTA structure both floated.<sup>95</sup> The stage was therefore set for international trade unionism to take on additional relevance when over the spring/summer of 1959 momentum began gathering behind a smaller trade bloc. As yet another Economic Committee memorandum would posit, this would demand of the TUC a strategy 'to hold together the unity of the European trade union movement and, as far as practicable, to maintain within the ERO the body of trade union policy on fundamental issues that has evolved in the last two years'.<sup>96</sup>

Within this broader trend it made perfect sense to concentrate on the union centres of the Seven. If nothing else they offered a ready source of knowledge to assist the TUC in deciding whether to reverse its initial scepticism of a smaller grouping.<sup>97</sup> The formal opening of intergovernmental negotiations at the beginning of June, and more so the publication on 9 July of a draft plan, would only make such a reassessment more urgent. Among the more insidious developments in the course of the FTA negotiations, meanwhile, had been the tendency of the British Government to turn a blind eye to TUC priorities, not least on full employment. Much could potentially be gleaned therefore from initiating early consultation 'to hammer out an agreed view'. Not lost on the TUC was that unions in Scandinavia and, to a lesser extent, in Austria held not inconsiderable sway over their domestic politics. Given there was 'broad political (and often personal) sympathy between them and the TUC which should make them amendable to our arguments', it was conceivable they might wind up persuading their own governments 'to take the same line in dealing with the British Government. This H[er] M[ajesty's] G[overnment] would not like, but if it placed sufficient importance on achieving a treaty between the Seven, for bargaining reasons with the Common Market, then it might be prepared to swallow it'.<sup>98</sup> Another route could in other words be found to exert pressure on a somewhat insolent Conservative administration. And were the union centres to fall short of such ambition there was still wisdom in paying them closer attention. At a governmental level support for a smaller FTA was by no means assured. Danish restiveness on agriculture was already well known, but Austria and Switzerland – whose trade was each trained on the Six – had reason to question the logic of a smaller grouping.<sup>99</sup> At the union level meanwhile was the somewhat unconnected tendency within Scandinavian confederations to question the worthiness of the ERO as an organisation.<sup>100</sup> Both developments seemed to justify a meeting of some kind. It is to the three major themes which would come to dominate these ensuing trade union discussions, as the governments of Seven themselves progressed first to negotiate and ultimately to establish a new trade bloc, that the remainder of this article must therefore turn.

The first and most urgent matter was to determine the exact features of any new treaty. Significant in this regard was the way in which the TUC appears to have learnt the dangers of ignoring those priorities held dear by its fellow centres. Its preparations for the inaugural union conference of the Seven – slated to take place in London on 18 August – hence placed a premium on reaching some sort of accommodation on agriculture, including Norwegian fish products, alongside the

<sup>94</sup>'Eleventh Progress Report', Econ.Ctee. 3/6, 10 December 1958, and TUC, 'Report of Meeting', Econ.Ctee. 3/11, 14 January 1959, MSS.292/564.7/4, MRC.

<sup>95</sup>'16th ERO Economic Committee: Summary Report', 21–22 April 1959, ETUC 324, IISH.

<sup>96</sup>'Economic Association with Europe', Econ.Ctee. 7/5, 8 April 1959, MSS.292/564.7/4, MRC.

<sup>97</sup>Woodcock to Seven centres, 28 May 1959, and 'Trading Association of Outer Seven', 18 June 1959, both MSS.292/564.7/4, MRC.

<sup>98</sup>Bowers to Murray, 25 May 1959, MSS.292/564.7/4, MRC.

<sup>99</sup>Jensen to Woodcock, 9 June 1959, MSS.292/564.7/5, MRC; Schevenels to Woodcock, 9 June 1959, ETUC 300, IISH; 'State of Negotiations for a Little Free Trade Area of the Seven', 15 June 1959, ETUC 19, IISH.

<sup>100</sup>Transcript of Schevenels speech at DSF conference, 13–15 May 1959, ETUC 154, IISH; Scandinavian Unions to Schevenels, 1 April 1959, ETUC 20, IISH; '17th ERO Executive Committee: Summary Report', 27 June 1959, ICFTY 1281, IISH; García, 'Constructing', 51; Pasture, 'Trade', 113.

usual full employment obligation.<sup>101</sup> This ensured that as the meeting got underway, an impressive degree of unity emerged on a statement outlining the basic safeguards unions hoped to secure. Somewhat speculative is the argument that, in doing so, the TUC also proved adept in obtaining the implicit support of union centres for the premise of a smaller FTA itself. Other motives apart and the continuing uncertainty over its own stance notwithstanding, there probably was an element to TUC actions whereby its representatives took it upon themselves to guard against possible British isolation at the international level. In this reasoning, any prospect that the Danish or Austrians might feel tempted to drift towards the Six could be undermined if their respective union centres opposed such a move. Certainly in private the TUC began talking of the Seven as ‘unstable but for tactical negotiating purposes [i.e. a multilateral agreement with the Six] useful’ and consequently cautioned against adopting any stance which might disturb ‘the valuable measure of collaboration’ it hoped to amass with other movements.<sup>102</sup> This in other words may well have been an act of ‘trade union diplomacy’ *par excellence*.<sup>103</sup> What is certain is that the so-called London Conference would mark the birth of a coherent trade union forum, with the August meeting the first of at least ten such gatherings to take place over the next eighteen months. The quarrels so prominent a feature of the FTA negotiations had seemingly been consigned to the past.

This would prove only more central when the second major issue – the institutional setup – came to the fore. One of the curious features of the intergovernmental negotiations was their relative speed: just seven months separated the formal opening of talks and the signing of the Stockholm Convention establishing EFTA on 4 January 1960. The ease with which the talks progressed was down partly to the fact that positions adopted by the Seven echoed those taken during the FTA. But it assisted massively that many of the more controversial decisions were deferred until later. In this sense the Convention was a quite primitive document which offered a mere skeleton of how EFTA should work.<sup>104</sup> A reference to full employment did, intranspired, make the cut, thanks in part to union pressure – notably the Norwegian *Landsorganisasjonen i Norge* (LO), which had won assurances from its government that it would ensure its presence in the Convention.<sup>105</sup> Missing, however, was any machinery to administer this. For the TUC and its partners, the flaws here were obvious. Shorn of a legal commitment, governments could simply ignore the concept completely, and with little oversight there would be no formal option to review progress or request sanctions.<sup>106</sup>

Subsequent trade union discussions, and those with their respective governments, were thus overwhelmingly characterised by the search for a format which handed the role to unions.<sup>107</sup> From the October follow-up to the London Conference the idea began to be fleshed out, confederations settling on a consultative committee of unions and employers encompassing regular hearings and the right of initiative.<sup>108</sup> The prospects of it actually being adopted by governments into the EFTA structure were not especially encouraging however until the following March, when union leaders voted to form a tighter grouping – the Trade Union Committee of EFTA Countries (TUC-EFTA) – to represent their interests.<sup>109</sup> Scholars elsewhere have termed this a ‘rival’ to the ETUS.<sup>110</sup> An arguably more immediate motivating factor prompting EFTA unions to act, however,

<sup>101</sup>Tewson to Seven centres, 28 July 1959, ETUC 306, IISH; ‘The Outer Seven Free Trade Area’, Econ.Ctee. 11/8, 12 August 1959, MSS.292/564.7/5, MRC.

<sup>102</sup>Report of Meeting’, Econ. Ctee. 9/3, 10 June 1959, and ‘European Economic Association’, Econ.Ctee. 9/2, 10 June 1959, both MSS.292/564.7/5, MRC.

<sup>103</sup>The concept comes from Carew, ‘Schism’.

<sup>104</sup>For more, i.e. Hugh Corbet and David Robertson, eds., *Europe’s Free Trade Area Experiment* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1970).

<sup>105</sup>Summary of Draft Convention of Small Free Trade Area’, 10 July 1959, ICFTU 2554, IISH. There is evidence to suggest the Norwegian government did then place this on the negotiating table, see ‘Stockholm Group: Record of Meetings of Working Group’, ES(EI)(59)(24), 2 June 1959, CAB 134/1870, TNA.

<sup>106</sup>‘Full Employment and Trade Union Cooperation’, 19 October 1959, ETUC 306, IISH.

<sup>107</sup>Tewson to ERO, 27 January 1960, ETUC 305, IISH; ‘18th ERO Executive Committee: Summary Report’, ICFTU 1282, IISH.

<sup>108</sup>‘Memorandum of Various Talks and Conferences’, 27 October 1959, ETUC 303, IISH.

<sup>109</sup>‘Memorandum of Meeting’, 10–11 March 1960, ICFTU 2254, IISH.

<sup>110</sup>Hyman, ‘British’, 104.



was the ever more crowded institutional landscape they faced. Access to national governments, as TUC experience had already shown, could not be taken for granted, and was likely only to worsen given the diffusion of EFTA's interests and the rise of competing influences such as the Association's newfound Secretariat, business federations, parliamentarians and ambassadors.<sup>111</sup> TUC-EFTA was thus an astute move to ensure that a trade union voice continued to be heard within the Association. Crucially, this objective did meet briefly with success. TUC-EFTA appears for instance to have been sufficiently weighty to convince governments to suspend their earlier scepticism of the consultative committee proposal.<sup>112</sup> This coming together of confederations would similarly help ensure equal representation on the consultative committee in spite of later attempts by the British Government to expand it in favour of employers.<sup>113</sup> And TUC-EFTA would ultimately emerge as a setting to thrash out an agreed trade union line ahead of meetings of the consultative committee itself.<sup>114</sup> Put another way, there was obvious safety – and influence – in numbers.

The third major topic was relations with the Six. One of the recurrent themes throughout this period had been the hope that a smaller free trade bloc could be used as a springboard to finalise a new arrangement with the EEC. This task seemed to be made a good deal more arduous by the fact that over the winter of 1959/1960 the Six had debated, and the President of the European Commission, Walter Hallstein had in March 1960 publicly announced, plans to speed up the implementation of the Treaty of Rome, including through the earlier introduction of the common external tariff. Others have explained elsewhere how the Seven's union centres greeted this proposal with dismay.<sup>115</sup> And this was doubtless true of the short-term at least. Discussion of the topic within the confines of the ERO – in which the centres of the Seven initially pilloried their ETUS counterparts of the Six for having welcomed the acceleration – even bore worrying resemblance to the sort of resentment and squabbles typical of the early portion of the FTA talks.<sup>116</sup> But, longer-term, the episode gave prominence to what a document prepared by the TUC's Economic Committee called 'broad trends', of which the acceleration plans of the Six formed just one element. As it spelt out, the growing interdependency of world trade and recent explosion in the number of global (economic) institutions on the one hand, but the shift towards division in Western Europe on the other, created 'a necessary climate for negotiations' between the EEC and EFTA. That in mid-1960 this seemed no nearer was not something the TUC-EFTA was satisfied with, however. Nor did it see the solutions as restricted to the level of relations between the two blocs. Suggestions variously to 'strengthen EFTA to be more like the EEC', of fully harmonising the Seven's social and economic policies, and potentially even embodying in the Stockholm Convention a common tariff of its own, instead reflected a widely shared grievance in the persistence of the Six/Seven divide, the failure of EFTA so far to rectify it, and the supposed inaction on the part of governments to make the necessary concessions to address either point.<sup>117</sup> A host of research papers considering ways to reform EFTA subsequently followed.<sup>118</sup> The hope, it seems, was that union transnationalism could transcend the impasse in a way few others could or had. With no better alternative, Schevenels would later write, 'everyone felt that something had to be done from the union side to bridge the gap'.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>111</sup>'EFTA Consultative Committee', 29 August 1960, MSS.292/564.741/2, MRC.

<sup>112</sup>Schevenels to Braunthal, 23 March 1960, ETUC 303, IISH.

<sup>113</sup>Scheveles to Tewson, 2 August 1960, ETUC 303; Jensen to Nordahl, 11 April 1960, MSS.292/564.741/2, MRC; Tewson to Seven centres, 26 October 1960, ETUC 305, IISH.

<sup>114</sup>The EFTA Consultative Committee', 29 August 1960, MSS.292/564.741/2, MRC.

<sup>115</sup>'Summary Report: Meeting of EFTA-TUC Consultative Committee Members', Econ.Ctee.8/9, 26 May 1961, MSS.292B/564.71/1, MRC; Pasture, 'Trade'.

<sup>116</sup>19th ERO Economic Committee: Summary Report', 28 April 1960, ETUC 324, IISH.

<sup>117</sup>Economic Association with Europe', Econ.Ctee. 8/2, 11 May 1960, MSS.292/564.7/6A, MRC. See also 'Note for Meeting', 26 May 1960, and 'Report of Meeting of National Centres', Econ.Ctee. 9/3, 8 June 1960, both ETUC 305.

<sup>118</sup>See various documents in folder MSS.292B/564.7/2, MRC.

<sup>119</sup>Jensen to Schevenels, 17 October 1960, ETUC 231, IISH.

## 5. Conclusions

That the TUC acknowledged such lofty aspirations could only ever be pursued alongside other centres is perhaps the ultimate illustration of the importance it attached to cross-border ties. And yet this particular example also captures nicely the complexity, indeed sheer limitations, of trade union transnationalism. True, the EFTA unions would in time raise the matter at the ERO-level. By October 1960 a joint Six-Seven committee had also been established to undertake a ‘mutual search for [a] solution to reduce or eliminate [the] adverse economic and social effects to be expected from the further widening of the gap between the Six and the Seven’.<sup>120</sup> But the archival record also reveals how quickly this resolve trailed off. By January 1961 unions would be awash with talk of Britain’s pending application for EEC membership. Six months later, a General Council meeting concluded that ‘no common trade union platform’ on enlargement existed.<sup>121</sup>

It is perhaps because of such shortcomings that scholars have tended to attach words such as ‘fragmentation’, ‘conflict’ and ‘division’ to Western Europe’s trade unions. While not denying this was the case, the analysis above has sought to capture what unions, and the TUC in particular, might have hoped to achieve through a range of transnational interactions. What emerges most strongly is that there was much to be gained: the TUC patently did get something out of all this. True, the value of union ties was often context-specific, and not all sub-networks elicited the same sort of returns. The TUC-CGT nexus for instance was arguably far more tense than the TUC’s relations with Scandinavian unions, and likely reflected the broader affinity between Anglo-Nordic social democratic parties.<sup>122</sup> Even so, studying the TUC from a national perspective still allows us to comprehend the rationale behind, and fallout from, contact with other confederations; in turn studying the transnational landscape offers a glimpse of what discussions took place, what concessions were made and whether/what victories were won. Viewed in this way, transnational trade unionism emerged as a way through which the TUC could learn from and persuade others of its views, objectives and affairs. Alongside governmental negotiations thus existed a parallel, often separate but sometimes interlinked set of negotiations between unions over ‘outer Europe’ and the integration process more generally.

What also emerges is that undue focus on union antagonism risks portraying the national and international realms as themselves inherently antagonist. Of course, unions were autonomous institutions with their own nationally-conceived and culturally-defined views, objectives and agendas. And European integration of all subjects was bound to elicit fierce debate given that it touched on vital issues for union members. Given as much, it is perhaps rather unfair that labour historians should expect union centres to overcome their national divergences and forge a coherent European-level policy platform. As other articles in this special issue demonstrate, this was hardly a standard met by the likes of political parties. Why, then, should trade unions be treated differently?<sup>123</sup> Disagreements in this sense were perhaps inevitable. But the two levels were often seen as both complementary and necessary – interaction indeed seemed to matter more as discord deepened, and even if no concerted position surfaced this itself was not always the purpose of union internationalism. There is thus good reason therefore for the historian to blend the two levels rather than see them in isolation, and deploy a transnational scope to help understand their complexity and interdependency.

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<sup>120</sup>Ibid.; ‘21st ERO Executive Committee: Summary Report’, 11 January 1961, ICFTU 1282, IISH.

<sup>121</sup>‘Future Trade Union Cooperation’, 21–22 June 1961, MSS.292B/564.7/2, MRC.

<sup>122</sup>See Matthew Broad, *Harold Wilson, Denmark and the Making of Labour European Policy 1958–72* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017).

<sup>123</sup>It is perhaps because of this that Anthony Carew has previously appealed for historians to be less critical in their analysis of international unionism, see Pasture, ‘Century’, 279, n. 7.

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