

Euromed Trade Union Forum: Towards a Social Dimension and Sustainable Cooperation

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The Euromed Trade Union Forum (ETUF) groups together trade union organisations that are members of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and trade unions from partner countries of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). Founded in 1999 in Stuttgart during a ministerial conference that was part of the Barcelona Process, the Forum was established as an exchange and cooperation platform, with no intention of laying the foundations for a new trade union organisation. The Forum is an initiative of ETUC in conjunction with the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), the International Confederation of Arab Trade Unions (ICATU) and the Trade Union Confederation of Arab Maghreb Workers (USTMA). The Forum activities and its positioning vis-à-vis the UfM are established by the coordination committee, composed by an equal number of European and Arab trade unions. The working languages are French and Arabic.

Difficult Beginnings before Reaching the Point of Mutual Trust

Before 1999, in-depth cooperation between European trade unions and the equivalent organisations from Arab regions did not exist. Apart from certain, rather 'diplomatic' contacts and rituals that were part of activities sponsored by international organisations or within the framework of the International Labour Organization, or on the level of certain, somewhat rare bilateral projects, there was an enormous void. The great obstacle at the start was a 'political' factor: the fact that the Israeli Histadrut (the central Israeli labour organisation) was also participating in the Forum caused quite

strong reactions by Arab trade unions, despite the fact that the majority of them (from Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine) had long been part of the same international labour union organisation –the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, or ICFTU (now ITUC)– as the Histadrut. Nonetheless, the Forum was finally established on the basis of consensus and has held three general assemblies since then with broad participation, including the Histadrut, except in Marseille in 2001, where the Arab delegations were present but boycotted the assembly, which moreover issued a clear declaration on the situation in the Middle East. This declaration was revised at the ETUF General Assembly in Barcelona in 2005 and unanimously adopted (including by the Israeli delegation).

Excerpt on the Middle East Conflict from the Final Declaration of the Euromed Trade Union Forum (3rd General Assembly, Bar- celona, 2005)

"The trade union organizations condemn all the forms of xenophobia and racism, of extremism and fundamentalism, of terrorism and authoritarianism, and of military occupation. The overcoming of these problems demands (...) for the reconstruction of a supportive social project, democracy, respect for the international law and the intercultural dialogue between the peoples (...). The trade union organizations request the governments to solve the existing conflicts in their region (...) according to international law and to the United Nations resolutions (...). Within this spirit, the resolution of the Middle East conflicts can only be carried out through the respect for the international law, through the unconditional application of the resolutions of the UN, the withdrawal of the occupational forces from all terri-

tories occupied since 1967, and the recognition of the Palestinian people's right to establish an independent State, next to the State of Israel. The trade union organizations emphasize the need for a prompt end of the occupation of Iraq, as well as on the fundamental role that the UN must have in the process of recovery of the sovereignty, the reconstruction and the guarantee of unity of this country. Also, they support the efforts made by CISL, WCL and CISA to help in the reconstruction and unity of the trade union forces in Iraq, on the basis of democracy and independence, so that they can fully have a decisive role in the defence of the workers' interests and participate effectively in the reconstruction of a free, sovereign and democratic Iraq."

(www.etuc.org/IMG/pdf/DeclaracionBCNInglesFinal-revised-2.pdf)

Once these clarifications had been made, the Forum managed to establish a cooperation framework for a strict trade union agenda.

The Coordination Committee of the Euromed Trade Union Forum decided to leave the Euromed non-governmental platform after an in-depth evaluation of its activity and the role of the ETUF therein. Realising the interest of cooperation among civil society organisations within the framework of Euromed networks, however, the Committee has declared that its leaving the platform by no means indicates that it does not wish to enter into cooperation with non-governmental networks and organisations on issues of joint interest. The Committee emphasises the need for the ETUF to focus its efforts and means on its social partnership positioning and on economic and social matters.

Moving towards 'Realpolitik' with Regard to the Situation of Trade Unions in Arab Regions and away from 'European Paternalism'

Trade unions are not NGOs. They are mass organisations with considerable power in society. Their capacity for action and for exerting an influence on economic and social matters depends, to a large extent, on their independence and autonomy. In economies primarily dependent on the State machine, they may well be relegated to the role of a cog in the wheel of the ruling political system, as is the case in

Syria or in Sudan. In 'liberal' economies and in an authoritarian environment such as in Egypt, the capacity for trade unions to carry out their primary function –defending the interests of employees and the unemployed– are quite limited due to the existing political control. But even in this case, trade unions under these specific conditions enjoy a certain leeway due to their quantitative force and occasionally obtain positive results.

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Trade union pluralism exists within a legal framework in certain Arab countries, namely Morocco, Lebanon, Palestine and Mauritania. In others, there are nearly insurmountable legal obstacles and in the best of cases, pluralism of opinion exists in a visible fashion within the only central trade union organisation, as in Tunisia's UGTT. In Algeria, alongside the 'historical' central trade union organisation, the UGTA, there are sectoral, representative trade union organisations, above all in the education and healthcare sectors. Where pluralism exists on a legal basis, in nearly all cases this pluralism is observed to be a 'partisan' one, created by political parties or political movements to equip themselves with an instrument which could eventually turn into 'unionism at the service of politics.' This phenomenon is highly evident in Morocco, with a good dozen trade union confederations that are attached to political structures in one way or another, with the exception of the 'historical' central trade union organisation, the UMT. An extreme example is Mauritania, with six trade union centres operating for the most part under minimalist material conditions but that have been finding more and more grounds for entente since the military putsch on 8 August 2008. The result is a considerable segmentation of trade unions, which is more an element of weakness than a sign of democratic expression. A culture of cooperation can nevertheless be observed to be steadily developing, within a context of considerable social tension, above all on the level of businesses and political institutions.

The trade union situation generally reflects the current state of a society. Trade unions hardly have a choice. They must adapt to come within the 'extant logic' in order to obtain results. Yet it is clear that they have potential for change, even if dormant, for they exist within the contradiction between authoritarianism and state control on the one hand, and the need for democratisation, the only factor that will allow trade unions to freely express the social and economic interests of their members, on the other. It is precisely this potential that encourages certain powers that be to exercise systematic intervention in the internal affairs of certain trade union organisations. This trend could grow in the context of the global financial and economic crisis, which will accentuate social crisis and poverty. This does not rule out another scenario, i.e. a weakening of authoritarianism and the development of democracy.

European trade unions should do away with a certain 'lesson-giving' tone and paternalistic attitude in their approach to and relations with South Mediterranean partners

In both cases, trade unions will remain 'the targets.' Certain powers will attempt to exploit trade unionism in order to keep the upper hand in explosive social situations, while opposition structures will seek the protection of trade unions as well as contact with the masses.

European trade unions should do away with a certain 'lesson-giving' tone and paternalistic attitude in their approach to and relations with South Mediterranean partners. All too often, cooperation projects –nearly always financed with public funds– are still impregnated with a Eurocentric spirit and are based on a philosophy of transferring the 'European model' to southern countries. The term 'donor' is revealing in this sense and ludicrously describes the inequality of relations. Public subsidies for cooperation projects are never absolutely 'pure'. First and foremost, they reflect the interests of the 'donors', though not always those of the parties on the receiving end. It is therefore essential to strike a balance between the interests of both parties and base the approach on the local reality and not on a transfer of a 'model.'

Trade Union Reform and Adaptation

In this spirit, and not without difficulties, the Euromed Trade Union Forum, using funds from the European Commission and the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), has drawn up a two-year project on trade union reform (2008-2009) in conjunction with the Forum's Arab trade unions. The project was to be directed by the Trade Union Confederation of Arab Maghreb Workers (USTMA), and the working team was composed of Arab trade union members and experts, with a single exception. One of the project's goals consisted of doing without European guidance by mobilising the skilled actors and experts from the South Mediterranean Region and limiting the role of the ETUC to that of agent for logistics assistance.

The subjects dealt with concerned the 'backbone' of trade union organisation: the articles governing internal affairs and establishing rights and obligations, collective bargaining and industrial relations that comprise the trade union's 'raison d'être', financial administration and internal management, public relations, the matter of trade union pluralism and the role of women in trade union organisations.

The conference of women unionists –this time accompanied by a 'quota of men'– held in Tunis in February as part of the trade union reform project and prepared in complete autonomy and with no European guidance by a working group in Casablanca, Amman and Tunis, demonstrates the dynamic potential existing in the Arab trade union movement. The conclusion of the conference, addressed to the trade union leadership of the Arab region contains an emphatic analysis and clear, pragmatic positions (See Box).

Union for the Mediterranean: 'The Big Blue' or 'The Big Bluff'?

The 'Sarkozy method' of handling political issues by making sudden moves, at times unexpected, surprising his partners, is often irritating but also laudable.

The Union for the Mediterranean project is a good example. The Barcelona Process, launched in 1995 with the aim of creating peace and stability in the Mediterranean area, had reached a deadlock: a highly bureaucratised structure in its last throes, a sort of 'Pullman' of cooperation between the EU and South Mediterranean Countries.

WOMEN'S APPEAL TO TRADE UNION LEADERSHIP IN THE ARAB REGION

We, the participants in the Euromed Trade Union Forum on "Women and Trade Unions in Southern Mediterranean Countries" held in Hammamet (Tunisia) on 23-25 February 2009 as part of the "Trade Union Reform and Work in the Mediterranean" programme;

In view of the active role played by women's contributions to trade union activities and the fundamental, necessary role of trade union action in protecting working women's rights and in working towards making social justice effective to the benefit of both genders;

After taking stock of the situation of women within the structure of Arab trade union organisations, characterised by their weak representation, in particular in decision-making spheres –which is in utter contradiction to the progress registered in the number of women joining trade unions and the significant increase of women's presence in other organisations of society;

Aware that the democratic and representational trade union movement should reflect the concerns of female and male workers on an equal basis, as well as the fact that the presence of women in decision-making circles and on bargaining committees constitutes one of the mechanisms for protecting the distinctness and rights of women and for strengthening trade union and social acquis;

In view of the fact that progressiveness is a referent for trade unions and that they play a significant role in the struggle for equality and against discrimination, particularly in the face of the growing phenomenon of the feminisation of poverty in the world, a poverty that strikes women first and foremost through precarious employment, layoffs and the calling into question of acquis;

In view of the revisions of the main lines of development on a worldwide level for three decades now and in order that these revisions not be based on biological disparities representing obstacles to the progress of women, but rather on a new approach that urges the increase of gender equal-

ity, allowing women and men to intervene in development activities with the same opportunities for access to services, resources and decision-making centres, as well as equal opportunity to participate in all aspects of daily life;

Considering that gender equality finds its reference within the framework of a conflict that society experiences on the economic and cultural levels between the forces of liberation, on the one hand, and the forces of exploitation of female and male workers and the sanctioning of the negation of women on the other hand, which would imply fostering a new, progressive vision with regard to women and the stepping up of legislation, policies and other concrete measures in order to attain gender equality, uphold women's fundamental rights, break with the attitude that women's presence is merely decorative and take into account their active, influential role;

Based on the position of numerous labour organisations in the world that consider the adoption of the quota system as the only mechanism for concretising a democratic position;

In view of all of the above, the awareness of our Arab trade union organisations leaning in the direction of the concretisation of effective equality, it goes without saying that a decision is urgently required to provide support to the working woman without violating democratic principles within organisations, and this by instituting the quota system for women within trade union structures and the search for necessary mechanisms for the application and active monitoring of women's contributions to trade union work and the fundamental and necessary role of trade union action in protecting working women's rights and advancing towards making justice a reality.

For further information:

www.euromed-trade-union-forum.org

The initial ambition of the French initiative was enormous: the creation of a 'Mediterranean Union' piloted by southern European Union Member States under the leadership of France. France's European partners, above all Germany but also the European Commission, were consulted sparingly, if at all. At that point, France –also serving its EU presidency at the time– found it had to adjust its tactics and water down the proposal somewhat. 'Going it alone' was now out of the question, as it challenged the principle of a European community policy within the context of the European Neighbourhood Policy.

The results of internal EU negotiations are perfectly reflected in the initiative's official designation, or 'controlled designation of origin', that is, the 'Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean'. Even if France had to make one compromise after another, it did manage to save the essential aspect: the perspective of being able to breathe renewed spirit and dynamism into a rather dismal, inefficient policy. The country entered a circumstantial alliance with Spain,

which will host the offices of the Secretariat in Barcelona, and it will share a two-year term as co-president of the Union with Egypt. This system will prevent the Union's management from falling under the 'rotational' regime of the EU presidency, a system that is more the result of a compromise based on weakness than of political rationale.

In fact, management by the southern EU Member States in partnership with South Mediterranean Countries is simply common sense due to their geographical and cultural proximity. The same logic is at the basis of an initiative recently revived by the Czech EU Presidency: the creation of an 'Eastern Partnership,' the UfM's 'eastern' counterpart. Essentially, this means that the EU's external relations of 'proximity' are becoming regionalised. This trend entails the risk of negative diversification and the possibility of more precise articulation of EU foreign policy.

On the 'south shore', things are not so simple either. In the absence of a common state framework, rivalries among South Mediterranean Countries insofar

as their positions vis-à-vis managing the UfM are considerable. The fact that the Arab League has finally found its place has attenuated oppositions. The quid pro quo is a compromise by which Israel will appoint one of the Deputy Secretary Generals. This point still elicits criticism and encounters resistance that could be accentuated by the rise to power of the nationalist right wing in the Hebrew state. The unresolved and even accentuated conflict between Morocco and Algeria remains another factor of destabilisation for the project. And finally, the UfM will not be able to dissociate itself from the Middle East conflict and will pay the price for the EU's rather negligible and not very cohesive role.

The Arab League Summit in Doha (late March 2009), which took place under considerable internal tension, has brought no progress. For the time being, the UfM is stalled and the prescribed mechanisms, including the ministerial summit and the diverse working groups, are apparently at a standstill.

Yet another factor could act as an impediment in addition to the internal divergences among Arab states, namely: the inclusion of Balkan states that are candidates to EU accession –Croatia, for instance– or that have Association Agreement status. Even if we consider the Adriatic part of the Mediterranean, any added value arising from this 'enlargement' is difficult to detect.

The Euromed Parliamentary Assembly (Brussels, March 2009), in which neither Syria nor Lebanon participated, met with the intransigent (and wholly justified) opposition of the Arab delegations on the Assembly Presidency's proposal to reduce representation of Arab countries to the benefit of Balkan countries. Even if a compromise was finally reached, this incident clearly demonstrates that institutional gesticulations and interests of a protocol order still prevent a true dynamic from being established.

Nonetheless, the conception of the UfM is simple and highly plausible: focussing on common, visible and serious problems, fusing economic and ecological aspects. The catchphrases: infrastructure and sustainable development (de-pollution of the Mediterranean, maritime and land motorways, civil protection, solar plan, education and research, development of enterprise). The 'philosophy' is clear: 'depoliticising' the project by avoiding delicate subjects, and in carrying out projects, applying a concept of opening to the civil society, in the sense of allowing participation and sharing. Hence –and this is a first–, the Euromed Trade Union Forum's proposals and demands

are being taken up by the Presidency of the UfM, making up for one of the Barcelona Process's glaring shortcomings: recognition of social partners, not to be confused with the conventional concept of NGO, as organisations to be consulted on matters concerning them and the consideration of the social dimension of cooperation. This naturally includes issues relating to workers' rights and associations' rights.

In conclusion, it should be noted that:

- It was high time to breathe new life into Euro-Mediterranean cooperation by applying the method of 'Realpolitik'.
- The French initiative was introduced a bit 'roughly', bypassing certain preliminary consultation needs and producing irritation on both northern and southern Mediterranean shores. But this method may have been the only way to avoid the routine of bureaucracy.
- The battle has not yet been won. This will depend to a large extent on the geopolitical environment. Without a positive evolution, the projects envisaged could remain at the station because the locomotive will have broken down.
- The European Union should demonstrate greater commitment and support to the UfM. Without the inclusion of the European Commission, the UfM will be a failure. It is urgent to join forces and act, burying sterile rivalries.
- The UfM is not just an intergovernmental structure; it provides interesting potential for real participation by civil society in projects designed to foster sustainable development and, above and beyond this, the advancement of society in general.

Social Dialogue?

What Kind of Social Dialogue?

The UfM Meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs held in Marseille in early November 2008 established the political foundation for taking into account the social dimension in implementing the UfM:

Developing a Genuine Social Dimension

"The 2007 workshop on employment policy helped to enhance the understanding of the challenges facing labour markets and employment

policies in the context of globalisation, technological evolution and demographic change. The first Conference of Employment and Labour Ministers (Marrakesh, 9-10 November 2008) will provide a unique opportunity to develop a genuine social dimension in the partnership, based on an integrated approach combining economic growth, employment and social cohesion. Ministers will review socio-economic developments in the region and examine concrete initiatives and proposals to promote employment creation, modernisation of labour markets and decent work. Ministers should approve a framework of action setting out key objectives in the fields of employment policy, employability and decent employment opportunities. This framework will also address important cross-cutting issues such as strengthening the participation of women in the labour market, non-discrimination, the integration of young people within the labour market, the transformation of informal into formal employment and labour migration. Employment and Labour Ministers should also approve an effective follow-up mechanism, with reporting on national progress and exchange of practices. Successful social and employment policies require the involvement of all relevant stakeholders, namely the social partners. In this connection, the cooperation of social partners across the Euro-Mediterranean region should be further developed."

The Euro-Mediterranean Conference of Labour Ministers held in Marrakesh a week after the ministerial meeting in Marseille was the first of its type in the history of the Barcelona Process. On the eve of the conference, representatives of the 'social partners' were invited to take part in an in-depth consultation, also a first in this context. The ETUF was represented by a delegation of six individuals, three of them representatives of Arab trade unions. As for employers' associations, a single representative of Business Europe participated, whereas the employers' organ-

isation of the South, BusinessMed, was absent. This demonstrates the employers' limited interest in social matters and a lack of coordination between the European and South Mediterranean employers' organisations.

'Social dialogue' at all levels among the partners is illusory because this 'dialogue' exists but little on the national level in Southern Mediterranean Countries, and because there is nothing 'on the plate'

In its final declaration, the Ministerial Conference first adopted a principle put forth by the ETUF to set up a formal structure of contact among social partners, a 'Social Dialogue Forum'. The ETUF's proposal was to create a 'consultative space' for social partners. It is clear that 'social dialogue' at all levels among the partners is illusory because this 'dialogue' exists but little on the national level in Southern Mediterranean Countries, and because there is nothing 'on the plate'. The 'negotiation table' will remain virtual for the time being. On the other hand, bilateral consultations between UfM governmental structures and social partners and their involvement in major UfM projects on sustainable development through the Social Dialogue Forum will be useful. In any case, trade union organisations have a vital interest in passing on their message, i.e. considering the social basket and decent work as an important factor for coherent, productive co-development.

In the long term, such a step could create conditions for establishing social dialogue that would be worthy of its name.

All of this depends on the 'operativity' of the Union for the Mediterranean, which for the time being, could remain prisoner of political instability in the region and the absence of real peace in the Middle East.