

Book Chapter

“In God We Trust”—The Contribution of Christian Trade Unions in European Integration

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Abstract

Since World War II, the countries of Western Europe have gradually gone towards economic, social, and political integration. This was influenced by states, institutions, social partners, and churches. The Christian trade unions also contributed to that end. This contribution was the result of the interaction between the laborers' religion and their desire to act collectively. Those unions followed the social doctrines of the Catholic Church and/or Protestant Churches while strongly disagreeing with socialist or communist unions. During the Interwar period, their members were subjected to the violent actions of the totalitarian governments in many European countries. Those governments eliminated Christian unions and, in some cases, persecuted their leaders. After the war, Christian unions embraced the "Peace Project", advocating for European and global peace. They also cooperated with many political and social leaders during the formation of the EEC. Christian unions aimed at improving political systems in Western Europe, promoting freedom of religion, and defending the Communist threat. In this article, we describe the ways in which the Catholic and Protestant labor unions tried to promote political, economic, and social cooperation in Europe. To this end, we will examine their pertinent material and actions on the Old Continent. Finally, we will discuss the current challenges faced by the Christian unions and their stance towards neoliberal capitalism and globalization—these new developments in the long history of Christian Europe.

Keywords

Social Teaching; Work; Trade Unions; Worker Rights; Rerum Novarum

Introduction

Following the Industrial Revolution, Christian churches initially held a rather indifferent and negative attitude towards the emerging trade unions [1]. However, both Catholics and Protestants later changed their positions and, discerning the

burning social and economic problems related to work, began to express reformist ideas [2]. The great turning point in the relationship between the Roman Catholic Church and the working class took place in 1891 with the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII [3]. This encyclical played an important role, especially if we take into consideration that the Pope noted that trade unions bring capital and labor closer together and that it is highly desirable that they multiply and become more effective [4]. In this encyclical, the role of trade unions is recognized as fundamental—linked to the rights of association—in promoting the establishment of unions that would push for the vital interests of workers in various professions [5]. The social doctrine of the Catholic Church after *Rerum Novarum* teaches that industrial relations must be characterized by the cooperation of the social classes. The trade unions fight for the promotion of social justice and workers' rights, but they should not fight against anyone [6]. For example, they should not be directed against employers. This implies that the church's doctrine disapproved of the Marxist concept of class struggle [5]. Later, in the 1930s, Pope Pius XI, in the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, rejected liberalism as unbridled economic competition [7] and affirmed the value of private property [5]. Nevertheless, certain scholars and activists doubted the possibility that Catholic labor unions could benefit working people in a free economy [8]. The social teachings of the Catholic Church included in several of its texts various fundamental workers' rights that should be legislated [9], while many of them were later included in the *Community Charter of the Fundamental Social Rights of Workers of the European Union* [10] and pertinent ILO declarations on labor rights [11].

The Nature of Christian Trade Unions

Christian labor unions are professional associations that developed with the encouragement of the Catholic Church in the late 19th century [1,12]. In some European countries, including Germany, France, and Switzerland, they were formed in order to slow down to a certain extent the development of the revolutionary workers' movement on the basis of class division and to promote the social teaching and doctrine of Christianity,

calling for an international brotherhood [13]. Christian trade union leaders proclaimed the preservation of private property and the cooperation of capital and labor [14]. Their ideology was based on the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which was later enriched by later papal encyclicals [4]. Several union leaders and certain priests proposed a third way of social reform and fostered demands for pertinent legislative initiatives, higher employment benefits, and stronger labor organizations [15]. Despite their willingness for social cooperation, Christian trade unions were often forced to confront employers and participate in strikes deemed necessary to further their cause.

The Christian unions were socially located halfway between the religious people and the working class. It was essentially a reaction of the Catholic Church and some Protestant churches to the problems of industrialization, de-Christianization, and secularization of the working class in Europe [12]. More generally, the trade union action adopted in Christian unions led to the creation of a loyal workforce that abhorred communist ideas and class conflict and was dedicated and disciplined. Christian unions also promoted the training of workers in a similar direction [12].

Christian unions essentially emerged as a reaction to the aggressive rather than religious disposition of socialist ideas, which at the time dominated the working class [2]. However, after the war, socialists became more moderate, while religious issues became less important to Christian unions. Consequently, these two tendencies of the trade union movement cooperated (they had, of course, previously united against National Socialism and Fascism) for the construction of a united Europe [7]. In fact, Christian unions sometimes disagreed on labor issues with some rather conservative Christian Democrat politicians while at the same time siding with socialist politicians.

Christian Unionism in the World

The main expression of Christian unionism on a global scale was the International Federation of Christian Trade Unions (hereafter

abbreviated as CISC, as per the French acronym), established in 1920 to represent the interests of workers in Western Europe and Latin America. This Confederation aimed to contribute to international development, while its influence was focused on political and social affairs in the countries where it had members. Its policies were based on the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* and other pontifical acts. It eventually adopted the slogan “*neither capitalism, nor communism*”.

From the outset, CISC was influenced by internal weaknesses and political rivalries. In interwar Europe in particular, IFCTU unionists initiated a tireless crusade against fascism and authoritarian corporatism in Spain, Austria, and Belgium [16]. IFCTU was greatly pressured by the destruction of trade unions in Mussolini’s Italy and Hitler’s Germany and the intense pressure on workers’ organizations by authoritarian regimes in Hungary, Austria, Spain, and Portugal until Christian unions were finally destroyed [7]. In these countries, the union members of CISC were inactivated or dissolved. However, CISC gained the right to appoint representatives to the International Labor Organization. It is worth noting that in the interwar period, the main trade unions in Europe, including the Christian ones, seemed to prefer the fora of the ILO in dealing with social issues and fostering labor legislation and/or labor conventions to the European framework [17]. In addition, after WWI, Europe remained the main global terrain, and the idea of European integration had not yet appeared in the transnational consultations regarding a better world. For example, CGB, the German Christian Union [18], participated actively in ILO fora, while only the Christian Labor representative opposed the inclusion of the Soviet Union in 1937 with an interesting argument [19]. In its regular session, it proclaimed its position on the eight-hour day, unemployment, immigration, the employment of women and children, and freedom of association. The tone of its proclamations was reformist, and its goals were moderate. In the Innsbruck Program (1922), it attacked the iniquities of socialism and communism without distinguishing these two political trends. Moreover, it proclaimed its conviction that economic and social life must be organized on the values of Christian ethics, charity, and justice as basic guiding principles

for social order. At the same time, the ideals of spiritual perfection and material well-being were recognized as the goals of CISC, and its members had to adopt Christian doctrine as the basis of human society.

After 1945, Christian trade unions had changed greatly because of the participation of members of many Christian unions in the resistance movements, while some unions were re-established as sectoral organizations, thus increasing their membership in the heavy industry sector. In addition, Christian unions reactivated CISC [20].

Post-war plans to revive the Christian trade union movements in Germany, Italy, and Austria largely failed despite tireless efforts. The unified DGB dominated in Germany, while the Austrian Christian trade unions were recognized as a trend within the ÖGB (i.e., the unified workers' federation). In Italy, the newly established ACLI (i.e., the Catholic Association of Italian Workers) declared in its statute that its members should recognize the foundation and the conditions of a renewed social order, in which they would insure, according to justice, the recognition of the rights and the satisfaction of the material and spiritual needs of the workers [21]. In fact, ACLI was a hybrid Catholic organization that promoted the social teachings of the Vatican within trade unions and political organizations and was trying to defend the spread of Communist influence among workers [22]. In addition, CISL turned into ICFTU [23]. Finally, at the Amsterdam Congress (1945), CISC proclaimed its commitment to the fundamental principles of Christian culture and its support for the fundamental transformation of modern enterprise, the recognition of private property, and compliance with the concept of industrial harmony. In the 1960s, they tried to bridge the gap with the Social Democrats and build a unified Europe [24]. The new leadership of CISC had not been influenced by the conflict between socialists and Christians, while Western Europe had turned towards the Atlantic alliance. The factors that contributed to this development were the further secularization of western societies, the fact that developing countries became more important, the gradual decline of colonialism, the modernization of the Roman Catholic Church,

and the new leadership of August Vanistendael, who became Secretary-General of CISC [24].

In the meantime, these unifying acts gave birth to many ambitions within the Christian trade unions. Many of their members participated in workers' struggles and/or strikes. Under these new conditions, a movement against ideological restrictions was developed, which promoted the de-Christianization of CISC.

Many non-European organizations joined between 1962 and 1964, and after 1964, CISC began to accept several non-Christian unions. As the CISC secretary-general said at the time, "*we cannot wait any longer until non-Christians have converted to Christianity*". In this way, Christian organizations began to transform into organizations of believers and later into organizations with no religious affiliations. Finally, in 1968, CISC was renamed the World Confederation of Labor (WCL), opting for an open confessional approach and accepting Buddhists and Muslims as members. With its gradual de-Christianization [24], the reason for separation from the ICFTU disappeared, and later they unified, forming the International Trade Union Confederation.

The purpose of WCL was to defend trade union freedoms and assist trade unions in their development. The number of its members reached about 26 million in 116 countries, and its largest organization was the Confederation of Christian Trade Unions of Belgium [25]. WCL was organized in a way that left wide autonomy to its union members. Its supreme body was the Congress, which met every four years and appointed the General Secretariat for a four-year term. The General Council usually met once a year, consisted of at least 22 members elected by the Congress, and represented its organization members. WCL had regional organizations in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, representative offices in Geneva and Bucharest, and was based in Belgium [26].

The European Perspective of Christian Trade Unions

In the early years, Christian trade unions were led by the clergy and aimed primarily at the middle class, but later they became more independent of the church and expressed much more of the typical working class. The strongest Christian labor unions flourished in Germany and Italy. During the interwar period, however, fascism and Nazism turned against these organizations, an action that led to their destruction. The attempt to reconstitute them after World War II was not very successful. On the other hand, in France, Christian unions were strong, especially among white-collar workers. There were also strong trade unions in the Benelux countries [12]. CISC represented the religious workers. At the political level, the trade unions within the Christian Democratic parties had to deal with many conflicts and contradictions because, on the one hand, they had to act as representatives of labor interests, and on the other hand, Christian Democracy had to act as a unifying scheme of all professions and classes, i.e., it was aimed at a wider political audience. In addition, some Christian Democratic parties were socially conservative, a fact that made it very difficult for them to coexist and join the respective unions [27]. The ideological identity of the trade unions within Christian Democracy and their commitment to the unification of Europe led to a partnership at the social level that satisfied Christian unionism [12]. The real strength of the trade unions was in France and the Benelux countries, and this greatly limited their overall power at the European level.

The main Christian workers' organizations in Europe were (1) the Dutch Catholic Trade Union Federation (NKV/1925); (2) the Luxembourg Confederation of Christian Trade Unions (LCGB/1921); (3) the Christian Workers' Union of Sweden (1899); (4) the French Confederation of Christian Workers (CFTC/1919 and later CFDT/1964); (5) the Italian Confederation of Trade Union (CISL/1950); (6) the Christian Trade Union Federation of Germany (CGB/1959); (7) the Christian National Union Confederation in Switzerland (CNG/1921); (8) the Belgian Confederation of Christian Trade

Unions (ACV-CSC/1925); and (9) the Independent Christian Unions of Slovakia (NKOS/1993).

This list of Christian worker organizations could be taken into consideration in order to underline that Christian unions have acted mainly in the industrial countries of Western Europe, where Catholicism and Protestantism were strong enough. In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), the Balkans, the Mediterranean countries (apart from Italy), and the Nordic countries, workers have chosen more “secular” forms of trade union expression. Given the historical circumstances (i.e., the communist regimes in CEE countries and the right-wing dictatorships in Southern Europe (in Greece, Spain, and Portugal), one might claim that Christian Unionism reflected better the economic and social situation of the “narrow” EEC of 6. When the European Union continued its expansion to the North, the South, and the East, Christian Unions lost their significance and their role became limited.

The Role of Labor in the Early Stages of European Socioeconomic Convergence

The first attempt at cooperation was made when the International Authority for the Ruhr was established, which would control coal and steel production after 1948 in the Ruhr industrial area. In March 1949, delegations from Belgium, France, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Germany set up a Standing Trade Union Committee in order to promote the interests of Ruhr workers in economic and social matters. Following the announcement of Schuman and Monnet’s plans for a united Europe, both ICFTU and CISC advocated European integration. However, there was no shortage of differences about the European project among international, European, and national trade unions [20,28]. Later, in January 1958, seven trade union federations of the six countries that were members of the EEC at that time met in Düsseldorf in order to realize the prospect of cooperation on an institutional basis. The participants confirmed their identity, their respect for, and their implementation of the European Treaties [28]. They also promoted a number of fundamental matters, such as the

allocation of a seat to a trade union official in the European Commission (similar to the High Authority of the ECSC), trade union participation in the administration of the European Social Fund, and the possibility of giving key posts to unionists selected by the unions in the services of the EEC. Finally, the confederations asked the European Commission and EURATOM to allow trade union representatives to participate in the implementation and to assert the establishment of the Economic and Social Committee on a permanent basis. They also stressed the need to merge the three European Commissions into one in order to avoid dispersing the trade union delegation [28].

After the establishment of the European Communities (in the 1950s) and EFTA (in the 1960s), the need for unified trade union representation at the European level emerged. At the same time, there were already some powerful organizations, the International Trade Secretariats, such as the Miners' International Federation, the International Federation of Textile Workers, and the International Metalworkers' Federation, i.e., another form of representation at the sectoral level [20].

In addition, different perceptions of trade unionism emerged both in countries of the north and of the south, while countries dominated by totalitarian regimes (Spain, Portugal, and Greece) had a suspicious attitude towards unionism. There was also the division of the European unification project into two separate ventures: EEC federalist and EFTA intergovernmental.

The European section of ICFTU at the time was ECFTU (European Confederation of Free Trade Unions). Trade union federations from many European countries participated in this organization [28]. The only Christian trade union involved was CISL, i.e., the Christian Democratic Trade Union of Catholic Italy [23].

On the other hand, in the European organization of the World Labor Confederation (European Organization /WCL), participated the unions NKV (Dutch Catholic Trade Union Federation), CGB (Christian trade union federation of

Germany), CNV (Protestant trade union of the Netherlands), LCGB (The Luxembourg Confederation of Christian Trade Unions), the French CFDT (into which had previously merged the former Christian federation CFTC), and the Association of Christian Workers (ACLI) from Italy. Additionally, certain unions representing countries outside the EEC, including CNG (Switzerland), ÖGB (Austria), SVEA (Switzerland), and CMTU (Malta), also participated [28]. The European Organization of WCL was charged with the largest part of the representation of Christian workers at the European level, even though most of the Italian workers did not participate in it.

Since its creation in 1958, the EO-CISC department has been in the midst of important developments in Europe. Its four congresses (1960-Bonn, 1962-Rome, 1964-Strasbourg, and 1966-Amsterdam) contributed to this. Finally, at the Brussels Congress (1969), EO-CISC/WCL continued to analyze European affairs from a trade union point of view and to seek the most appropriate solutions for the labor side through the adoption of a social project for Europe [20].

The Path to the European Labor Organizations

Christian trade unions gradually started to be represented at the European level by EO-CISC (EO-WCL after 1968), while free trade unions were represented by ERO-ICFTU, which changed into the European Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ECFTU) in 1969. This separation of unions made trade union representation more difficult. In 1972, the EEC summit in Paris decided to adopt a European program for social action. However, that same year, an ongoing dispute arose between ICFTU and WCL over representation on the Board of Directors of the International Labor Organization [20]. On 5–6 February 1972, a meeting of the most important leaders of EO-WCL in The Hague with representatives of ECFTU bore good results, and a declaration of intent was formulated for the formation of a European trade union federation by the two organizations that would have participated in the founding of ETUC from the outset. However, the conflict within the ILO delayed the inclusion of Christian trade unions by a year. Eventually, the

European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) was established on the initiative of the ICFTU, in which only one Christian confederation from Italy (CISL) participated. However, after an agreement between the EO-WCL and ETUC on 7 March 1974, Christian trade unions joined the ETUC, a development that was ratified at the ETUC conference in Copenhagen on 23–25 May 1974. On 31 May 1974, EO-WCL decided to dissolve itself, and after that, the ETUC represented 35 million workers from 30 member organizations [20]. The ICFTU was the dominant actor in the founding of the ETUC, while the WCL played a less important role. Hence, the values and principles of the liberalist unions affected the future of the ETUC more than the values and beliefs of Social Catholicism [29].

For instance, the French CFDT used the opportunity to affiliate with the ETUC as a vehicle to further minimize its Christian influences in favor of a more modern view of the labor market landscape [29]. Furthermore, CFDT has actively participated in several debates regarding the future of Europe [29]. Thus, CFDT successfully promoted Christian and Socialist workers' cooperation by adopting a new secular program on labor market reforms, even though it partly defied their Roman-Catholic members [30]. Given that perspective, CFDT decided in its 36th Congress, held at Brest in 1979, to withdraw from the WCL [31] (https://labordoc.ilo.org/permalink/41ILO_INST/1s2ok2m/alma992059363402676) (accessed on 24 February, 2022)

In their declarations, the European Christian trade unions have defended both trade union pluralism and the European social model, which is based on solidarity, subsidiarity, non-discrimination, and gender equality. In their view, the EU has been the most successful peace experiment in the world, an area where Europeans, despite their significant differences, find strength in their common values: democracy, participation, equality, social justice, solidarity, sustainability, respect for laws, and human rights. Europe needs economic, social, and environmental progress, such as prosperity, social security, medical care, a fair distribution of income, public services, a healthy natural environment, etc. It is necessary to strengthen social rights in the EU, such as the right to form and join a trade

union, the right to collective bargaining and strike, the right to social dialogue, and the right to information and consultation, including co-decision [32]. Europe insisted on investments in employment and education, human rights, democracy, religious freedom, gender equality, and the implementation of laws at the national and/or European level. The EU must address global challenges such as climate change, avoiding international escalation of conflicts, hunger, and forced migration. At the national level, the German Christian trade union (CGB) advocated European ideals and European policies in order to build a unified Europe [33]. In Belgium, the CSC served militant Catholicism and declared in 1980 that the economy should serve man and society. At a conference that took place in 1985, it was argued that trade unionism should serve democracy and solidarity [25,34]. The CSC chose to support transnational trade union unity in order to promote the interests of European workers against multinational corporations and declared that workers should have a stronger voice in the construction of the EEC. It also stated that it was working towards political reinforcement of the EEC with a view to tackling the structural crisis at European level and ensuring employment for all. Finally, he argued that trade unions should strengthen global solidarity for workers in the Third World [25]. Moreover, the Christian labor movement, as the Belgian example shows (Flemish and Walloon union collaboration), could promote the cooperation of European nations in the EU by ignoring nationalism [16]. Thus, in Belgium, Christians and Socialists had the opportunity to collaborate in overcoming their traditional divisions and to foster common action within the ETUC [35].

At the European level, the European Union of Christian Democratic Workers (EUCDW) is very active. It is an organization of Christian Democratic workers that brings together workers' organizations that were pioneers of the European model manifested by Christian social teaching. This organization promotes the strengthening of the social market economy, which is at the core of the EU's philosophy, and the successful coupling of economic competitiveness with social justice.

Actually, EUCDW is not a trade union federation/organization but an alternative forum that expresses European workers who have adopted the values of Christian Democracy in their political and/or social action. Specifically, EUCDW aims to promote cooperation with the workers and their organizations with a Christian outlook, to disseminate Christian-social ideas, and to foster the establishment of national and/or regional unions of Christian-social workers [<https://uia.org/s/or/en/1100035837>] (accessed on 30 December 2022) .

Its manifesto, *A Just, Competitive and Protective Europe 2020–2024*, adopted by the EUCDW Council on 1 February 2020, in Porto, set out the following main directions: (a) continuing to deliver a European Authority of Social Rights; (b) moving towards the establishment of a European Labor Authority to promote cross-border cooperation; (c) ensuring a framework for the minimum wage per Member State through negotiations between the social partners; (d) extending minimum standards for employee participation and co-decision in European companies operating in accordance with European law; I agreement on measures for the platform economy; (e) more efficient decision-making processes in the existing EU capacity to be integrated; (f) implementation of the principle of equal pay for equal work in the same working environment in all sectors of the European economy; (g) promotion of the principle of equal pay for equal work between men and women; (h) development of a European Social Protocol encompassing horizontal social actions in the EU, in line with ILO principles.

In the 1990s, WCL argued that the desired European social model is under pressure from rampant international competition, high unemployment, increasing work flexibility, and the absence of fiscal and social harmonization in member countries, which threaten both trade unions and the prospects of the human factor in Europe [31].

As the EU broadened its integration to the east, especially after 1990, the importance of Christian trade unions diminished because many of the new member countries—such as in the Balkans and elsewhere—did not have a strong presence,

especially in Eastern Orthodox countries. On the other hand, they accepted new members for whom religion was important, such as organizations from Poland and Slovakia. It is worth noting that the Polish experience in the 1980s with the union Solidarity was undoubtedly influenced by the crucial role of Pope Jean-Paul II [36].

In any case, Christian trade unions have promoted European integration with all their might, despite their strong reservations about the way neoliberalism perceived the European project in economic and monetary terms but not in social and political terms [37].

Conclusions

Social Christianity in recent decades was forced to confront ecumenical issues of trade union interest as the new rising economic powers were outside the reach of powerful churches. The early concertation of Roman-Catholic and Protestant labor organizations was a forerunner for the cooperation of the Germanic-speaking countries and the Latin-speaking countries in the united Europe during the foundation of the European Communities in favor of the western socioeconomic vision (against the socialist and communist one). Due to its geographic limitations in Western Europe, Christian Unionism played an important role in the first steps of European unification. However, EU expansion to the South, North, and East, as well as the foundation of ETUC, a specific European labor organization, have limited its strength and impact on the European labor market.

Christian Unions have not been significant in countries where the Orthodox dogma dominates because of the different traditions of Greek-Orthodox social teaching (Greece, Bulgaria, and the Republic of Cyprus). The possibility of the entrance of more Balkan countries into the EU will enhance this group of countries (Serbia, FYROM, and Montenegro), where Christian Unionism has been very limited or inexistent.

The societal organization in the post-industrialized countries of Europe was threatened by financial capital, powerful global corporations, migration flows, and the rise of non-Christian countries to the top of the world's economic powers (e.g., China, India).

The main trends that have determined the new position of Christian trade unions have been: (a) the decline in the importance of Christian trade unions and religious differences in Western Europe due to the increase of multiculturalism and secularism; (b) the slight increase in the importance of such unions in Eastern Europe; (c) the rapid increase of the non-religious workforce of immigrants; (d) the great narrowing of differences between Christian and socialist/social democratic trade unions; (e) the reduction of the activity and influence of communist trade unions as well as their revolutionary attitudes; (f) the transformation of Eastern European regimes; (g) the gradual elimination of the differences between and the eventual merger of ICFTU and WCL, and; (h) the gradual devaluation of trade union activity in the broad social strata of modern societies.

This is the reason why the Christian trade union movement must now reconsider its position in the uncharted waters of an emerging world. Christian trade unions may have accepted both the free economy as an economic system and the cooperation of the productive classes, but globalized capitalism, advocated and promoted by neoliberalism, threatens the traditional values of Christian countries. Time will tell whether Christian unionism will turn against the post-industrial capitalism that threatens its cherished traditionalism or whether it will seek a new balance in the turbulent economic and social developments in the Old World, possibly in cooperation with the other trends of the international trade union movement.

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