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THE US AND WESTERN EUROPE: A COMPARATIVE
DISCUSSION OF LABOR MOVEMENTS IN THE POSTWAR ECONOMY

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March 1988

In an attempt to move forward from the historical reconstruction of postwar American foreign policy in the labor field, which has been studied in several works on the Marshall Plan years, this paper discusses a few of their interpretative conclusions, and addresses a few larger issues about the boom of the European economies in the 1950s and 1960s.

It can safely be said that the American effort in the labor sphere, particularly with the Marshall Plan, aimed at a radical change of the landscape of industrial relations and a thorough reshaping of European trade unions' practices. This is precisely what most of the newdealers and the unionists inside the Economic Cooperation Administration intended to achieve. By and large they did not succeed, and the reasons why such an overambitious goal was not reached give us a few insights into the nature of the economic and political reconstruction of Western Europe.

Two different but converging types of historical studies have explored the origins, the implementation and, only to a minor extent, also the actual impact of the diplomatic and economic policies developed by the Americans on what they used to call the "labor front" of the Cold War. The first were those by labor historians who looked at the chain of political events that brought to an end, at the beginning of the Cold War, both the strategy for structural reforms and the framework of large political unity which the trade unions of most European countries had inherited from the antifascist resistance. On the European side, such studies focused on the quick retreat of united labor coalitions from the programs

of sweeping reforms devised in 1945. When the emerging Cold War division, in 1947-8, precipitated a global confrontation between left and right - in France, Italy, Germany and Greece - trade unions had to give up their attempts to become a factor of central importance in the political life of each nation. The ambitious programs for nationalizations, institutionalized workers' controls and a decisive role of trade unions in dictating macroeconomic policies were be dropped, and substituted with a frustrating return into the lesser realm of economic bargaining within industry¹.

The most visible aspect of such process was the break-down of the coalition of various political tendencies inside the labor movement. The united labor confederations born at the end of the war were split, as in France and Italy; anticommunist purges and bitter fights between a communist left-wing and a christian or socialdemocratic righ-wing ended the antifascist unity of action in every European country - and even in the USA. This deep realignment of labor forces was best symbolized by the break-up of the World Federation of Trade Unions, which remained an essentially communist organization after the split of the TUC, the CIO and all the christian and socialdemocratic European federations, which gathered in a rival International Confederation of Trade Unions in 1949.

European labor studies have focused on the split as the most evident sign and factor of labor's historical defeat. In an attempt to explain the diminished societal role forced upon unions by the Cold War division, historians looked at the role played by the US

government and unions. This factor has obviously been most prominent in the studies about Germany - where the occupations authorities, staffed and advised by American unionists, played an important part in the rebuilding of a western-oriented trade union movement -; in those about Italy, Greece and France - where American unionists helped the formation of anti-communist labor organizations; and particularly in the studies on international labor diplomacy. On this latter subject, both European and American historians have quite convincingly demonstrated how a very close and interactive cooperation between the two American labor federations and the US government acted as the main force in precipitating the global confrontation which split the international labor movement². The main contribution of these studies was to emphasize the international dimension of postwar trade union policies, stressing how labor problems had turned into one of the key issues of the international conflict. A new pattern of mutually advantageous collaboration between unions and governments was emerging in the international arena, and this was most evident in the American case. But most of these studies stopped short of what was clearly the key factor: Marshall aid and the economic choices related to it. They mentioned the European Recovery Program as the formal issue around which European labor's debate had turned into an irreversible break, but did not analyze it: thus failing to reconnect international labor policies with the dynamic of economic reconstruction. The negative effect of this absence - most remarkably in the work of the historians of American

labor - prevented also a clear understanding of the aims and actual achievements of the US policies towards European labor³. Because the central pillar which supported the whole American vision of a stabilised European society was precisely the economic action embodied in the ERP.

Therefore, we have to turn to the studies on the Marshall Plan and European reconstruction to find the second, most interesting portion of literature on the subject. All the studies concerned with the political impact of the Marshall Plan on European labor have substantially relied on Charles S. Maier's concept of "the politics of productivity". Maier emphasized the appeal on the moderate left of a proposal for economic growth as the main key to social harmony and stability. A larger and constantly increasing output would bring prosperity to all sections of society, and this would avoid class conflict which - in the American vision - arose primarily from scarcity. Social conflict had not only to be contained, but channeled into an a-political framework of consensual bargaining among organized interests. Reflecting America's own experience throughout the New Deal and wartime mobilization in an idealized fashion, the Marshall Plan offered a vision of social consensus based on an ever-growing national income. Growth had to be considered as the common interest of industry and labor, whose organizations ought to orient their mutual relationship toward the superior aim of an improved economic performance. Thus, growth came to be seen as the prerequisite for the establishment of a contractual, a-political system of

industrial relations, which would accomplish the essential function of sharing and spreading the benefits of increased productivity throughout society⁴.

Two important implications of such a proposal need to be emphasized. First, the ERP appeared, from its very beginning, not only as a policy best suited to reach the strategic goals of the US in the Cold War, nor just as a project for international economic coordination, but - much more comprehensively - as a social philosophy addressed to European society at large, and particularly to industry and workers. Second, and precisely because of such broad social character of its main thrust, it called upon the main forces and institutions of American society to actively participate in its development and implementation. It was particularly American labor that was called into action, because trade unions were obviously best equipped and legitimized to sell the plan's productivist message to their European counterparts. Such an interventionist role had a strong appeal upon American unionists, and for very good reasons: it allowed them to forge a badly needed working alliance with their own government; it supplemented their bid for international labor leadership with strong political and economic foundations; and, even more excitingly, it projected American unions themselves as live models of a new and allegedly successful way of interpreting labor trade unionism in the postwar world.

With the launching of the Marshall Plan and its immediate rejection by the Soviets, the divisive impact of the Cold War rift

was powerfully and directly brought to bear upon labor unions' most vital strategic choices. The economic and social nature of the American proposal turned the previously abstract issues of international conflict into very practical and inescapable matters of economic policies, social alliances, political alignments and bargaining attitudes. Inside most European unions, the struggle between radical and moderate elements precipitated into a final clash about the actual prospects for growth and for the improvement of workers' income and standing. Socialdemocrats and christians, so far fearful of breaking the unity of labor federations, found in the Marshall Plan an economic rationale with which they could counter the communists' emphasis on structural reforms. The prospect of prosperity brought by American aid could be offered to the rank and file as a promising way to raise its standard of living. By joining their national governments and industrialists in large, powerful centrist coalitions, they could effectively corner the communists in an apparently 'destructive', negativist, untenable isolation. On the international stage, the gathering of liberal, socialist and christian unions around the Marshall Plan proposal - a process forcefully fostered by the activism of American trade unionists - offered them a new, inviting setting: a large family of labor organizations to which they could comfortably belong without feeling as isolated splitters of their own national labor bodies⁵

Thus in 1948, when the non-communist unions of Western Europe joined in an ERP-Trade Union Advisory Committee, the division of

international labor acquired an irresistible momentum. The split of the French CGT had just taken place, the one of the Italian CGIL came after a few weeks, and the formal unity of the World Federation of Trade Unions collapsed in less than a year. By early 1949 the American initiative had achieved its first and foremost political goal in the labor sphere: European unions were definitely divided in two opposite camps, and the vast majority of Western European unions actively supported the ERP, in a few cases even betting their own future upon its success. The communist opposition in France and Italy became vulnerably weak, isolated and challenged by new, small but verbally aggressive competing unions backed by governments and by the whole international machinery set in motion by the ERP. With the establishment of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, in 1949, an optimistic mood pervaded ECA planners and American unionists. Now that the political and organizational framework of European labor had been drastically reshaped in accordance with their hopes and desires, the time seemed ripe for challenging the traditional pattern of industrial relations, and restructuring it along the lines of the American model⁶. But this task proved much harder and far less successful.

In the view of the newdealers and unionists which staffed the ECA, the cycle of growth spurred by Marshall aid had to be matched by an almost concomitant improvement of all sections of national income. Investments were the key to further growth, but wages had to rise as well if workers were to receive, and appreciate, some

of the benefits of the 'prosperous capitalism' promised by the ERP. The need for such a betterment of workers' standard of living was considered particularly crucial and urgent in those countries where political stability had just been achieved and looked still dangerously precarious: France, Germany, Italy. In the Cold War frame of mind and scale of priorities, these countries were not only central factors for the economic recovery of the continent, but also the very front-line of the political confrontation between East and West. Since unions were seen as the major factor for the integration of workers into increasingly prosperous democracies, it was particularly in these countries that the newly established non-communist labor organizations had to become successful, powerful, appealing to the workers and effectively integrated in the mechanism of growth. The answer to these simultaneous necessities was to be found, according to the ECA, in a steady improvement of productivity and in the establishment of an efficient, consensual, pluralistic bargaining structure which would provide for a socially balanced distribution of the gains of productivity among all the factors of production. A constant, smoothly running subdivision of the bigger cake was deemed to be the pillar upon which rested the social and political stability of Western Europe. The economics of growth obviously applied to all the other participating countries as well, but in the UK and in the northern countries nobody feared any major threat to political stability, and the productivity drive had less ambitious implications. It was a matter of freeing up trade, intensifying

competition and expanding industrial output. No small goals; but nothing as far-reaching as the ambition to restructuring the economic and institutional foundations of social bargaining, which was ECA's dream for France, Germany and Italy⁷.

The ECA, the American unionists posted in Europe and the Labor Attaches in the US embassies set the productivity drive effectively in motion in 1950. It went hand in hand with the reiterated American efforts towards the integration of the national economies in a continental market. The economic motives for both campaigns were exactly the same: liberalization and integration would stimulate competition, make larger economies of scale possible, increase productive and distributive efficiency. Thus a larger output with lesser costs would provide consumers with an increasing amount of cheap, affordable products. Prosperity would bring the social integration of workers, thence assuring political stability. Thousands of unionists, employers and technicians were sent to the US to see by themselves how competitive mass-production could normalize social conflict and reduce tensions to manageable proportions. The propaganda and educational aspect was just as an essential part of the productivity drive as the technical effort to implant new machinery and organizational methods in European factories⁸.

In political terms, however, the very core of the program was the attempt to conform industrial relations to the axioms of the politics of productivity: in the interest of political stability and social integration, an effective mechanism for a socially

balanced distribution of the benefits of higher productivity was just as essential as the actual achievement of increased efficiency. They were the two sides of the same coin. No major improvements in productivity were deemed possible without the cooperation, or at least the acquiescence, of workers and unions. On the other hand, if higher productivity did not generate higher wages and levels of consumption, social peace and democratic stabilization would have very few chances to last. Thus unions and employers had to be brought at the same table, where - under the supervision of governments and ECA missions - they would work out plans for close cooperation in cost-cutting and efficiency-increasing devices. In return for their collaboration, unions would receive recognition and higher benefits; communist trade unions were obviously to be kept out of this scheme. As soon as the 'free' trade unions proved able to deliver at least some tangible goods to their rank and file, workers would desert the left-wing organizations and the communist threat would gradually vanish from the political scene. A virtuous cycle of growth, social integration of cooperative organized interests, and spreading prosperity would thus liberate Europe from class-oriented conflicts.

At first, the sheer abstractedness of such a vision did not in the least deter the American planners. But the productivity drive did rapidly stumble into growing obstacles. Employers were not particularly keen about granting unions - even 'free' trade unions - any relevant role in what we would today call a neo-corporatist frame of mutual cooperation. They could much more

profitably take advantage of the overall weakness of a divided labor movement whose bargaining power was reduced to a minimum by its own internal fractures - as in Italy and France -, and by a high rate of unemployment - as in Italy and Germany. Since communist unions were substantially delegitimized and even repressed, and since 'free' trade unions could not resort to open conflict - for their structural weakness and their commitment to political stability - the productivity drive could very well be used by industry to cut its costs, accelerate its restructuring and increase profits, without being immediately forced to grant any substantial benefit to workers.

National governments, on the other hand, had a firm commitment to stimulate growth and higher investments but, at least in the early 1950s, did not share the political urge expressed by ECA planners for an immediate, vast increase of the internal demand of consumer goods. Stable wages served the competitive restructuring of each national economy much better than politically determined concessions to trade unions. As long as the combination of Cold War anti-communism and of a very elastic supply of labor kept trade union pressures under control, even 'free' trade unions had really no leverage for their claim to higher wages and a positive recognition of their bargaining role. As unions started to grumble about the lesser role to which they were forced, and eventually dropped out of most of the schemes devised by the productivity drive, some ECA officials came to realise that their plans might be neat but scarcely realistic. The rearmament effort further

strained to their very extremes the incompatible economic and political goals of the newdealists' vision. The American plans appeared theoretically coherent, but the failure to implant in Europe a system of neo-corporatist, well balanced arrangements for power-sharing among organized interests under public supervision, eventually revealed, more than anything else, that the Americans could be suggestive but certainly not all-mighty.

The tripartite productivity agencies or committees set up in each country worked very well as a source of technical and organizational education for managers and engineers. They certainly increased the familiarity of European firms with low-cost mass-production techniques; and the credits, machinery and know-how provided by American aid accelerated the modernization of many plants. But the committees for productivity did never manage to become a clearing-house for industrial disputes, nor the setting for far-reaching agreements between organized interests. In most cases, unions abandoned them after several frustrated attempts to force employers and governments into concessions - either political or economic - which simply was not in their power to obtain. In several experiments set up in the so called 'pilot plants', union participation in operating new and more productive techniques was seldom compensated with negotiated wage increases. At best, employers handed out productivity bonuses on an individual basis, thus further undermining unions' representation and strength. In most cases, however, workers received very little compensation from the improvements in efficiency; and in some cases the productivity

drive resulted in a reduction of the labor force. To the utter despair of the American advisors, employers often refused even to decrease their sale prices and give up cartel arrangements, which were the main liberalizing aims of the whole campaign for productivity. French and Italian employers often replied to the preoccupations of ECA officials by saying that their problem was not bargaining with the 'free' trade unions, but rather with the communist ones, which remained relatively larger in the manufacturing sector. But these unions, in turn, were extremely weakened and directly threatened by the lay-offs and the restructuring of industry⁹. So that the circle was effectively closed, at the best advantage of industry. As a result, rates of unionization rapidly dropped: in Germany, the main industrial unions barely preserved their membership, even though the overall labor force was growing. In Italy the number of union members in manufacturing decreased throughout the 1950s. In France, between 1950 and 1955, unionization collapsed: the overall figure of union members was cut down in half, and did not begin to increase again until 1960. The level of strikes went down even more dramatically during the whole decade, and started to rise again only in 1958-9. More importantly, only a small rate of strikes concerned successful demands for higher wages or other benefits. In most cases it was a matter of resisting against lay-offs or dismissals¹⁰. Union activity, for most of the 1950s, was defensive in character and generally unsuccessful in its outcome.

By 1953-4, most of the newdealists involved in the management of foreign aid - and most noticeably those with a labor union background - were talking with quite explicit bitterness of a defeat of their efforts. They blamed European employers and governments for an allegedly 'feudal' conception of capitalism, a preference for unilateral domination rather than pluralist interaction in the sphere of industrial relations, a short-sighted neglect of the necessity for an economy of prosperous consumption extended also to the working class. But they also charged the 'free' trade unions, rather inconsistently, of being too rigidly committed to the stability of anticommunist coalitions and thus rather shy, submissive and not enough militant in claiming a 'fair share' of the growing national income for workers¹¹. As a matter of fact, French and Italian 'free' trade unions, even in those sectors where they had some relevant presence, were able to exert a successful pressure only in the few, rare occasions when they joined their efforts with the communist federations, in ill-disguised and very short-lived united fronts. Even the united and relatively powerful German DGB had very little chances to put forward strong demands: the labor market was flooded with large numbers of incoming eastern refugees; employers could make profitable deals, at company level, with the work councils rather than with the unions; and the defeat of 1950-2 on the extension of codetermination outside the coal and steel industry left the labor organizations excluded from the institutional arrangement which they had hoped to use in order to grow as influential partners of

both industry and government. In none of these countries the Cold War years brought into being a cohesive structure of neo-corporatists negotiating bodies and practices between labor, industry and government. The boom of the European economies grew in an environment marked by the temporary marginalization, if not exclusion, of labor as a relevant and influential social partner¹².

Even those historian who tend to stress the far-reaching impact of the American neo-capitalist vision agree that the European economic structures and institutions were only half-Americanized. As late as 1957 even an official and quite propagandistic history of the productivity drive, by the American agency in charge of foreign aid, had to admit that while the technical results of the campaign for industrial efficiency were very good, its social achievements lagged far behind. In relation to the Italian case the pamphlet stated that no great advancement was foreseeable as long as unemployment did not drop to much lower levels (which, by the way, was finally just beginning to happen)¹³.

In historical perspective, the American attempt to export into Europe an a-political, productivity-oriented system of industrial relations based on business-unionism and corporate liberalism is puzzling not just for its practical failure but particularly for its inherent, domestic weakness. After all, European labor, after a decade of hardship, did grow more powerful and influential. In the 1960s, when full employment was reached on the whole continent, and the Cold War paralyzing divisions were overcome and substituted with unified strategies, European trade unions came back as

effective actors of economic and political bargaining. They reinforced their function as negotiating agent for wage earners through a rather comprehensive and overtly political role as central factors in the management of general welfare systems and, wherever they could, in macroeconomic-policy decision-making. At the beginning of the 1950s, on the other hand, the apparently powerful and proud American unions were entering a phase of bright, although limited, economic gains but - generally speaking - of historical decline as an influential force in society. Throughout the 1950s they managed to consolidate a relatively privileged economic condition for unionized workers of mass-production manufacturing. But they were completely unable to extend the boundaries of collective bargaining and assume a negotiating role for the constantly growing non-unionized sector of the labor force; they also failed to stimulate and encourage the establishment of public, all-encompassing institutions of social welfare, and remained confined in the management of privatized welfare plans restricted to the labor force of a few big companies. Thus, their influence as a central element in political and macroeconomic negotiations kept constantly declining, and it was already reduced to a comparatively minor degree well before the crisis of the 1970s and the process of de-industrialization began to endanger unionism all over the industrialized world¹⁴.

What is most striking is that American labor and liberal leaders - who came to Europe with the notion that the traditionally European political and class-oriented unionism was only a relic of

the past - were convinced that no such decline was in sight for them. To the contrary, in Cold War years they held an optimistic view, persuaded as they were that the domestic legacy of the 1940s (especially the war-time experience) spelled the inevitable success of a prosperous capitalism whose social imbalances could be effectively cured by labor's role in privatized collective bargaining. Productivism and industrial democracy appeared to them as the triumphant solution that could defeat stagnation and class-based conflicts, while making unions more powerful and workers much better off¹⁵.

Only one substantial explanation can be advanced for such a profound misjudgement of the historical prospect ahead. And that is that such a mistaken perception was made possible by the unique situation enjoyed by American industry on the international markets in postwar years. When America's output represented 40% of world GNP and all her competitors were faced with the basic task of reconstruction, newdealists and CIO leaders could well believe in the long-term and universal successfulness of a model of unionism based only on a strategy of industrial bargaining that was to deliver economic benefits just to limited sectors of the working population. But such a self-deceiving approach could hold only as long as American manufacturers had a strong advantage in productivity levels; as long as an unchallenged domination of markets large enough as to allow for substantial economies of scale could make relatively high wages affordable. In short, as long as foreign competition was temporarily absent and large mass-

production industries - automobile is the most evident example - could step up productivity primarily by extending their scale of operations, rather than intensifying production. Under such conditions, well organized business-unionism could very well exchange a commitment to increased productivity for higher wages and benefits: because the net slightly inflationary result did not immediately endanger the big manufacturers' domination of markets. However, such a strategy for labor was to be decisively challenged - as we very well know today - as soon as the first German or Japanese cars entered the American market.

It then becomes evident that the golden decades of American unions' economic success - the 1940s and 1950s - did not indicate a universally valid model of social betterment through collective bargaining: this was American labor's delusion during the Marshall Plan. To the contrary, they reflected a unique, unexportable and unrepetead situation of America's relative isolation from the constraints of interdependence and the competitive pressures of the world economy.

Evidently, this was not the case for European industry and labor. As a matter of fact, the model proposed by the Americans was - given the actual strength and ambitions of European labor - a goal at the same time too difficult to reach and not enough rewarding. It was too much in the short term, and too little in the long-run. The American project looked forward to the constructive interaction of unions and employers to take place in a privatized, technical and non-political dimension. On the background of a

consensual commitment to growth and productivity, labor and industry were to negotiate an efficient and equitable timing both for the stepping up of productivity and the subdivision of its growing returns. This was supposed to take place under the umbrella of macroeconomic decisions and guidelines set by the interplay of market forces and government policies theoretically beyond the reach of organized interests' bargaining. Thus, it implied the integration of labor unions in negotiating mechanisms mainly at the level of single firms or, at best, of industrial sectors. The national committees for productivity did never resemble - except in the dreams of very few unionists - anything like an influential body making decisions on macroeconomic issues. And integration of organized interests in power-sharing bodies at a supranational level was an even more unrealistic fantasy that only very few American advisors took into consideration. But the firm or industry level was exactly the ground upon which unions, in the first half of the 1950s, had very little ability to exert pressures and achieve influence, when overall policies were not explicitly directed to favour and enforce labor demands.

The crux of the matter was a very elastic labor market. After the defeat of the politically oriented strategy for structural reforms and the enforcement of stabilization policies in 1947-49, labor was confronted with tough economic conditions. High rates of unemployment undermined the potentiality of wage demands and tamed unions into a defensive attitude. Where a sharp split of labor organizations had taken place - as in France and Italy -

competition and infighting between different unions allowed employers to play one against the other, thus regaining an almost undisputed ability to fix wages and conditions. Besides, the Cold War climate of heavy-handed anticommunism, which turned every real or threatened interruption of industrial peace into a burning political issue, further restrained labor ability and inclination to successfully use industrial action.

Of even greater importance, however, were the dynamic changes of labor market conditions and the new trends in manpower supply underlying the early boom. The simple quantitative statistics on unemployment do not completely reveal the extent or the nature of the difficulties faced by trade unions, and could not explain the crisis and weakness of unionism in France, where there was no basic unemployment problem. But if we look at the changing patterns of labor supply in manufacturing industry, we begin to get a clearer picture. Throughout the investment boom of the early 1950s and even later, we see a more or less pronounced but quite deep, continuous alteration in the composition of the labor force. A constant, growing and sometime huge inflow of new workers matched the surge of investments in manufacturing and construction. In some cases (Germany and Italy are the best examples) the sheer quantity of this new, elastic supply of labor seems to account for the stability of wages¹⁶.

In general, however, it is probably the qualitative factor that can best explain the roots of unions' weakness. The new workers came from agriculture, from small independent trades and

artisan craft-shops, in some case from abroad. They came from situations of very low income, underemployment or lack of employment altogether, sometime outright poverty. To most of them, industrial wages - however low and slowly growing - represented a net improvement in standard of living, and industrial employment a decisive betterment in occupational stability. Their adjustment to industrial and urban life, and sometime to a new country, might have been culturally tough, but the net income gains were sufficiently convincing as to make them stick not only to industrial employment (there wasn't much choice anyway), but also to an initially subdued and undemanding attitude towards working conditions. Most of them had very little, if any, previous experience of union organization and collective bargaining, and did not share with the older workers any tradition of political and union activism. In France and Italy, in several cases, they were recruited through strongly politically-biased channels - church, 'free' trade unions, political parties - which obviously discriminated against potential militant and troublemakers.

Vis a vis this new and growing group of workers there was, especially concentrated in manufacturing, an older generation of skilled and experienced workers who had entered industry before or during the war. In general, they had a more cohesively collective and militant attitude, in several cases had participated in resistance movements, and had everywhere been the backbone of the short but intense season of union rebuilding at the end of the war. In Germany as well as in France and Italy they were the single

social group which had most decidedly hoped for structural social changes in the postwar period, and they represented by far the most important segment of all unionized workers. In fact, they were the very foundation of unions and even more radically so in the case of the communist and leftist-oriented ones. It was their bargaining strength - however precarious - that had been lowered and then broken with the collapse of coalition governments, the defeat of radical reformist strategies, the split of union federations, the useless struggles against the Marshall Plan, the policies of stabilization. Between 1947 and 1949 they had been politically and socially defeated, and in the Cold War years they ended up being represented by union federations quite delegitimized and almost powerless, as in France and Italy (or, as in Germany, by unions which had to painfully adapt to conditions of limited influence)¹⁷.

As the boom gained momentum, the growing supply of a new labor force, coupled with the intense restructuring and modernization of production, transformed the unionized, militant sector of the manufacturing working class in an encircled group which could not effectively oppose or resist the introduction of new productive techniques and the lay-offs that went with them, nor could push demands for higher wages. The political division of the trade union federations, where it existed, simply reflected and multiplied this substantial economic weakness. While the communist unions wasted their little strength in vain attempts to resist the restructuring of industry, the christian and socialdemocratic ones just could not muster enough strength, in a flexible and rapidly shifting labor

market, to put forward forceful demands which took advantage of the growth cycle. In Italy real wages, in the 1950s, did not rise as fast as productivity. Even where they increased substantially, as in Germany, it was mostly through individual, non-contractual steps whose pace was unilaterally established by employers¹⁸. For a good many years the changing character of the labor force, and the imperatives of political stability and social peace, prevented even those unions which shared the culture of growth and productivity (and its political commitment) from exercising a strong bargaining role. This situation changed only at the end of the decade, and even more substantially in the 1960s. The younger generation of manufacturing workers had by then adjusted to industrial work, gradually dropping the submissive attitude produced by sudden change and a relative improvement of income, and integrating itself in the habits of collective bargaining and union representation. Conditions of sustained full employment, together with a more relaxed political climate, allowed unions to press forward with aggressive demands. The two diverse sectors, or generations, of manufacturing workers were reunited in a single powerful group kept together by a tight labor market, where even the large inflow of foreign immigrants (in France and especially in Germany) could not seriously undermine labor bargaining power and prevent wages from rising. Unionization was also spreading to many non manufacturing sectors of the labor force, and trade unions emerged in the second part of the long postwar boom as powerful agents both in the

economic bargaining among social interests and in the determination of national public policies¹⁹.

Nonetheless, in the first decade of the European boom the intense modernization of industry, aimed at the attainment of stronger positions on international markets, had taken the utmost advantage from a large supply of labor whose shifting character had assured wage stability and almost unchallenged managerial control upon manpower. In fact the deep, competitive restructuring of industry, fostered by the widely perceived necessity to assure the viability of each nation's economy in an interdependent world - where the ability to export was to be the measure of a country's economic power and survival -, had undermined the traditional strongholds of political unionism while also postponing the coming of age of a new, productivity-oriented unionism. Therefore, powerlessness in industry - in the early 1950s - prevented labor from successfully playing its part in the neo-corporatist schemes devised by the policies of American aid. At the same time, such schemes always appeared as inherently limited and unpromising to most European unionists. Either for their long-standing political tradition, for the necessity to develop strong links with political parties or, more importantly, for the conscious need to overcome their ineffectiveness in a divided labor market, European unions in most cases looked forward to a much more ambitious and influential integration at the level of national policy-making. It was not just the result of that long history of political unionism that the Americans would have liked to eradicate. In the sharp

political confrontation of the Cold War years, union organizations were considered as essential providers of social consensus, and their political support was actively sought after, both by government and opposition parties. It was then quite natural that trade union leaders tried to achieve - in return for their disciplined and responsible attitude towards national growth - a major role in the determination of overall economic policies. More to the point, however, was the strategic thinking of labor organizations. Precisely because of the temporarily debilitating effects that the restructuring of industry had upon their bargaining power, trade unions generally looked at the investment boom (and it took them a few years to realize that they were really facing a sustained boom) as to something that had to be corrected and balanced by a growth of social expenditure and of low income group's consumption. Throughout the 1950s unions tended to conceive of themselves more as a general interest pressure group for the growth of internal demand and employment than as a specific bargaining agent for occupied wage earners²⁰. This obviously derived from the perception of their weakness in a fragmented and shifting labor market, but it paradoxically projected them on a more ambitious course which contemplated their participation in the management of public institutions of general welfare and the negotiation of macroeconomic policies. In the early 1950s this often looked as escapism from the hardship brought upon them by the restructuring of national economies for the sake of international competition. But later on, when full employment made union power

a reality, these strategies afforded a political integration of labor unions at a much higher and more comprehensive level than the one conceived by American newdealist planners.

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The above discussion leads to two conclusive arguments. The first one concerns a comparison of the different challenges faced by labor movements in the early 1950s, and of their diverse responses. The established view of the recovery of the European economy as an export-led boom has been increasingly questioned and criticized, in recent research, as a gross underestimation of the growth of internal markets²¹. Even within this new view, however, the fear of foreign competitors remains as one of the central factors behind business investment strategies, and most government policies, aimed at increased productivity. The intense restructuring of national economies which nourished the boom was largely shaped by widespread and profound anxieties about each nation's ability to compete, and even survive, on international markets. It was the battle for exports and foreign currency, for a long-term diminished vulnerability to, and larger presence in, international trade, which set the standard parameters by which industrial efficiency was judged and pushed forward. The evidences pointing to a rapid growth of domestic markets provide for a healthy revision of stagnationist analysis of national growth. In the closely intertwined economies of Western Europe, however, this

factor does not at all reduce the relevance of competitiveness in the international economy as the main concern behind the modernization of industry and the public policies for larger output, which eventually found the answer to the domestic imperatives for growth in 'an institutionalized pattern of economic interdependence'²². It is upon this background that the major difference in the conditions faced by European and American labor movements comes clear. European unions simply could not entrench themselves - as the American did - in relatively sheltered sectors of industry where the cost of almost parallel gains in productivity and wages would not decisively damage production performances largely aimed at a domestic market. European unions were, for a few years, much more vulnerable to the internationally-oriented restructuring of industry²³, and no American scheme for neo-corporatist partnership could relieve them from the burden of - actual and perceived - interdependence.

The second conclusion is related to the established view that the boom was accompanied by a keynesian consensus on the importance of full employment as the long-term goal of governments' policies throughout the boom. If we consider the whole period of roughly 25 years of sustained growth, there is no doubt that the commitment to avoid depression and maximize employment stands out as the consistent response given by government institutions and political parties to the social demands channeled through the electoral process. But this general, apparent truth requires further specification from two points of view. The first is the

chronological development of the policies adopted in order to pursue that long-term priority; and the second is a more detailed analysis of the actual mechanisms of the political competition for social consensus which resulted in the imperative of employment maximization.

We are used to consider the urge towards a full employment economy either as the product of a global demand generating from society after the disastrous experience of the 1930s, or as the effect of a political pressure coming from the left-wing²⁴. These two factors should be seen as complementary, and functionally related, rather than mutually exclusive: their interaction was the central factor of the political game in the new postwar electoral democracies. It was precisely because the political competition - centered on the consensus of large, but differentiated masses of voters - was always open to a challenge and to the possibility of defeat, that conservative politicians and centrist governments had to define their strategies in terms of no depression and maximum employment. It was not a matter of direct electoral defeat by leftist parties (this possibility, in a few cases, emerged only in the late 1960s), but rather the risk that the constant building up and reshaping of social coalitions, which assured electoral success, could be arrested, slowed down or reversed. Delivering sustained growth and ever-increasing employment, year after year, was an inescapable necessity in the endless search for a consensus which could never been taken for granted, once and for all on a stable basis, but had to be achieved in a permanently dynamic and

shifting fashion. Centrist governments somehow had to constantly buy their own time: trying to keep one step ahead, through ever-increasing growth, of social demands and expectations that could at any moment turn into destabilizing, centrifugal political behaviour. This was particularly relevant in so far as industrial workers were concerned.

Besides, when we look at the initial stage of the boom we have to take into consideration the political confrontation and settlement which set such mechanism in motion. The almost obsessive fear of a break-down of the newly acquired political stability of France, Germany and Italy, up to at least 1952-3, can easily be discarded as a peculiar and exaggerated attitude of American diplomats and observers. Nonetheless, the Cold War politics of anticommunism were a real and influential factor in defining the nature of the competitive political process. The breaking up of trade unions' potential power to resist the restructuring of industry; the opening up of the labor market in order to reduce labor' ability to freeze industry into an uncompetitive position; these were not just American Cold War goals pursued through Marshall aid: they were considered as the necessary preconditions for an effective management of the boom by centrist governments. Isolating labor into temporary powerlessness was not so much a function of ideological anticommunism, but rather the starting point for the political viability of centrist coalitions bound to growth. It was as the initial lead that politicians needed to get

in order to keep one step ahead in the race for electoral consensus by means of sustained growth.

Since the modernization of industry was deemed indispensable - in order to reach a high employment economy in an interdependent world -, then an initial stage with relatively stable wages and a manageable mobility of the labor force was needed. This meant a restriction of unions' bargaining power and a parallel marginalization of the leftist parties. Then, and only then, the political and electoral mechanism of dynamic consensus through growth would begin to operate. Growth would deliver rising prosperity to increasingly larger social groups - presumably starting with middle classes and, on a much lower level, with those new industrial workers whose entering into manufacturing shifted and altered the social basis upon which any seriously conceivable challenge from the left had to be based. Thus political stability came into being as the net result of continuous movements of income, employment and social alliances. The dynamics of growth constantly reshaped the geography of social consensus, maintaining the threat of a political alternative in an embryonic state, and allowing governing coalitions to keep afloat even in the presence of still relatively large rates of unemployment. Only when full employment was actually reached, the social and political challenge from leftist oppositions did seriously materialize; but its threat had somehow always been there, as one of the hidden engines which kept the politics of growth running forward.

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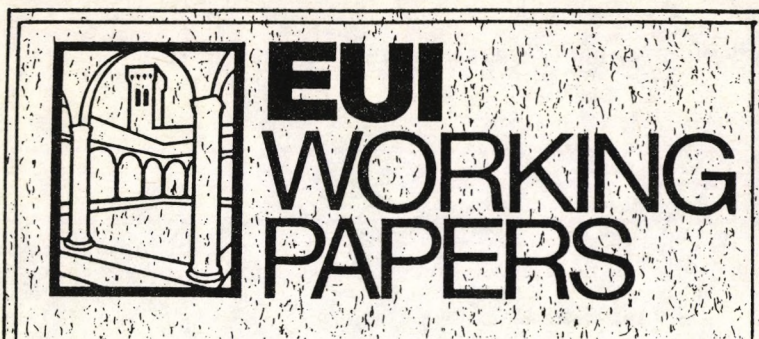
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