

Jacques Delors, as seen by the European trade union leaders of the time

By Christophe Degryse, Senior researcher at the European Trade Union Institute

“Jacques Delors said that social dialogue is “one of the foundations of a democratic society”. Our return to Val Duchesse today, 39 years after the first Val Duchesse social partners summit, could not be more timely. There is today the necessity for social partners and for the EU institutions to renew our joint commitment to social dialogue. Social dialogue is a key component of our democracy and must be safeguarded and reinforced. We need to return to the vision of a Social Europe that Delors set out in Val Duchesse 39 years ago today. This can and must be the moment we start to get European social dialogue back on track”.

Esther Lynch, General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation

In 1985, the European Economic Community was mired in what has been called ‘Eurosclerosis’. Upon his arrival in Brussels as President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors set himself the goal of relaunching the European project. He set in motion a new political dynamic. For this reason, some commentators refer to the period of 1985-1995 as a ‘golden age’. But this overlooks the fact that the context at the time was not so rosy: economic stagnation, unemployment, and growing inequalities. The political situation was tense, particularly with Margaret Thatcher's very conservative British government. Relations with the trade unions were not at their best either: for years, the ETUC had been opposing Europe's increasingly liberal policies and calling for proactive recovery and employment policies.

In this difficult context, the image of a providential Jacques Delors reviving the European project with a few magic formulas is a little imprecise. But based on the testimonies of trade union leaders at the time¹, we can identify four key words that characterised this particular period: strategy, audacity, vision. And the fourth is ‘alchemy’, because the circumstances surrounding Delors' arrival in Brussels were particularly favourable.

Alchemy

When Delors arrived in Brussels in 1985, François Staedelin (1928-1991) was a Confederal Secretary of the ETUC and a former member of the French trade union confederation the CFDT. According to Jean Lapeyre (ETUC Confederal Secretary 1986-1991 and Deputy General Secretary 1991-2003), ‘François Staedelin knew Jacques Delors very well. He had also been a CFDT activist. He had headed his research

¹ Oral history project conducted by the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) between 2022 and 2023, interviewing former ETUC leaders. Interviews conducted by Christophe Degryse, Philippe Pochet and Sigfrido Ramirez Perez.

department.’ The two men ‘were of the same generation; there was a natural complicity between them. There was no need for long explanations’. Staedelin attended the first Social Summit in Val Duchesse on 31 January 1985, to which the social partners were invited.

When Staedelin retired from the ETUC in 1986, he was succeeded by Lapeyre, a former industrial glassblower who had also risen through the ranks of the CFDT. ‘I knew Jacques Delors from his CFDT days,’ says Lapeyre. ‘Relations were easier: Delors always stayed in touch with the union, with Edmond Maire and Jacques Chérèque, of whom he was a great friend.’ The relations Staedelin had developed with the Commission's Social Affairs Directorate and with the Director-General at the time, Jean Degimbe, and his deputy Carlo Savoini, were well established. Jean Degimbe was very socially committed in Belgium, and Carlo Savoini was a trade union leader at the Italian CISL. When Lapeyre arrived in Brussels, he already knew these people. ‘So everything came together,’ he recalls. ‘That's where I sometimes say it's a bit miraculous. It was an incredible opportunity to have a President with a Commission that followed him on this and with Social Affairs Commissioner Vasso Papandreou, who had the intelligence to play the same strategy. It was a time when the stars were aligned: we had the right people in the right place at the right time.’ The charisma of Jacques Delors crowns this alchemy.

Strategy

Delors' strategy was to complete the European internal market by involving the social partners in its social dimension, particularly in social dialogue. Following the Val Duchesse meeting, UNICE-ETUC-CEEP working groups were set up. According to Lapeyre, ‘with regard to these prospects for (pre-)social dialogue, the employers, who until now had refused to accept any change, found it difficult to resist’.

In 1985, Delors published his White Paper on the completion of the European internal market². This gave rise to the Single European Act, which was endorsed by Thatcher's government as it was interested in the prospect of a single market. But the Single European Act also introduced qualified majority voting in the social field. This enabled the Commission to gradually develop a genuine legislative programme encompassing not only health and safety at work but also the organisation of work, including, at a later stage, the question of working time. ‘Suddenly, a new space opened up,’ says Lapeyre. ‘And to avoid being subjected to this new social legislation, employers would now say to the Commission: “Stop! This is a matter for the social partners, we're going to discuss it!”.’ Tom Jenkins, Senior Adviser to the ETUC General Secretary from 2003 to 2015, describes ‘a system where you could advance social dialogue and put pressure on the employers to make a deal with the unions, because if not, the Commission would say, “Well, if you don't agree, we will put in a directive”’. And that was the strategy.

Audacity

Jacques Delors needed to find new allies. With supreme audacity, this socialist went to look for them in the United Kingdom, a country where the government was conservative, the Labour opposition was against the European project, and the national Trade Unions Congress (TUC) was rather Eurosceptic too. ‘The TUC was pretty anti-EU in terms of the resolutions that our Congress used to pass year after year,’ recalls Tom Jenkins. But Delors succeeded in getting the Single Act and the 1992 internal market project adopted by stressing the need to incorporate a social dimension in it. Gloria Mills, now President of the ETUC Women's Committee, remembers: ‘We thought: “Well, as trade unionists, we need to get involved in this”. It meant we spent a lot of time looking at the plans of Jacques Delors. He had a very good record in France, although he had imposed some austerity measures. At the time, we saw Jacques Delors as someone with a vision that would help to raise the living standards of workers across the borders, tackle inequality and curtail the imbalance of employers' power.’

In 1988, Delors went to the TUC Congress in Bournemouth. John Monks, later ETUC General Secretary (2003-2011), witnessed his speech. ‘I was at that Congress, yeah. I was singing “Frere Jacques”, and we were all really enthused by his speech. It's a big congress, and the atmosphere was absolutely electric. The Delors speech was a turning point for the TUC. Because of the hostile reaction from Mrs. Thatcher, that made him

² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A51985DC0310>

even more of a hero with us because he was our friend. He was coming to the rescue.’ Tom Jenkins explains: ‘We wrote a report called *Maximising the Benefits and Minimising the Costs* about the 1992 project, and a resolution which basically swung the TUC’s position on Europe.’ John Monks adds: ‘What we expected from the aftermath of the Delors speech was collective bargaining at the European level.’ The impact of the TUC’s turnaround was also political: ‘The Labour Party Conference is always three or four weeks after the TUC conference. And the Labour Party Conference followed the TUC line,’ Jenkins emphasises. So what we saw following the Bournemouth congress was a political reconfiguration. In Thatcher’s eyes, it was a provocation! ‘She said, “I’m not having socialism introduced from Brussels by that man”,’ remembers Monks. ‘She then went to the College of Europe in Bruges three weeks later and gave an anti-European speech, very hostile to all kinds of social policy.’ But Delors had gained his new allies.

Vision

In 1991, Emilio Gabaglio was elected General Secretary of the ETUC. At the time, Europe was in the midst of preparations for the future Maastricht Treaty. Jacques Delors encouraged the social partners to draw up a joint contribution on the development of social dialogue, to be incorporated into the Treaty. Gabaglio remembers: ‘At the ETUC Congress in 1991, Delors told us: “Hurry up and reach an agreement with the employers!” The employers were dragging their feet and we weren’t getting any results.’ But with Delors’ encouragement, an agreement was finally reached on 31 October 1991. ‘With this agreement, included in the social protocol of the Maastricht Treaty, we structured a social dialogue dynamic with a conventional dimension. I’ve always been convinced that if there’s no contract, there’s no union. So I thought it was absolutely essential to develop a logic of industrial relations on a contractual basis. It was a very important change in the ETUC’s profile and role.’

In addition to social dialogue, the President of the Commission was concerned about the growing problems of poverty and social exclusion. ‘Until then, this concern had not existed at all in the European Commission,’ recalls Jean Lapeyre. Delors set up a Social Exclusion Unit, headed by Odile Quintin, who later became Director of Social Affairs. For the ETUC, this was an opportunity to reaffirm that ‘the trade unions must be players in this strategy to combat social exclusion,’ says Lapeyre. ‘It was at this point that we started working on the ‘Europe of Greater Solidarity’ project with homeless and anti-poverty associations. At the time, it was completely innovative.’

Another major contribution by Jacques Delors was the White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment³. For Emilio Gabaglio, this White Paper ‘was a bit like his legacy. The ETUC welcomed this document as a very important step forward for Europe. It addressed the issues of growth, employment, the consequences in terms of political structuring, European governance, etc. But I quickly got the impression that, in the end, the Member States were not paying much attention to this important step forward.’

According to Maria-Helena André, ETUC Confederal Secretary at the time, ‘the responses that the trade union movement made at the time to the White Paper were positive, always with the caveat that economic policy could not be treated in the same way as social policy, and that the big priority was job creation. I think we probably started introducing at that time, during those conversations, the idea that, yes, we need more jobs, but that’s not enough. The jobs that are created must be good quality. We need to respect workers’ rights, and we need to expand those rights in the context of the challenges ahead.’

Social dialogue, the internal market, employment, the fight against social exclusion... ‘Jacques Delors, in my view, was a real visionary,’ says Reiner Hoffmann, Deputy General Secretary of the ETUC from 2003 to 2009. ‘He really gave new life to European integration. And it was not only the single market – which was important, but Delors was pretty sure that the single market would not work alone. It needed a social dimension, so one of the most important contributions of Delors was to create a social dialogue. It was quite impressive to see the energy with which he pushed this project forward.’

³ Commission’s White Paper on “Growth, competitiveness, employment - the challenges and ways forward into the 21st century” published on 5 Decembre 1993. See: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/4e6ecfb6-471e-4108-9c7d-90cb1c3096af/language-en>

Epilogue

‘If the President of the Commission doesn't know where he wants to go, if he doesn't indicate a direction, nothing will come of it,’ emphasises Jean Lapeyre. ‘Delors was surrounded by exceptional people: his social adviser Patrick Venturini, his legal adviser François Lamoureux, his director of cabinet Pascal Lamy... All these people were behind a man who had a vision and a strategy. They knew that they were helping to get a project off the ground, implement it and develop it.’

‘We had a European Commission that really understood and embraced the fact that the trade union movement had to be part of constructing a more integrated and a better Europe,’ concludes Maria-Helena André. ‘I'm not saying that this was then reflected in practice over the years that followed. But in that moment, there was a new world of opportunities. We had a set of policies that, if they had been well implemented and if there had been more political will, would have made Europe better than it is today.’

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