



**DR. DIMITRIS TSAROUHAS**

**“The Party-Union Link and the Future of Social Democracy”**

*A rejuvenation of the party-trade union link could play an important part in the recovery of European social democracy.*

Coinciding with the biggest financial crisis since the second world war, and an economic crisis whose full consequences have yet to emerge, the ‘good society’ debate offers social democrats an opportunity for reflection and programmatic rejuvenation. Both are necessary. Although it is too early to judge the political consequences of the crisis, it seems clear that progressives are once again in an uncomfortable place. In spite of the complete vindication of their earlier calls to regulate markets, social democrats are now being blamed for the bloated public sector, and the constraints this poses on a swift recovery from the crisis! Nowhere is this better illustrated than in Conservative attacks on Labour in the UK. But this is just one example of a wider issue. European social democracy has yet to redefine its core message in these changing circumstances, and to articulate a viable way forward – conscious of the realism that is entailed in governmental responsibility, yet confident in its values, and bold enough to openly do away with market fundamentalism.

Clearly, this process of reflection and rejuvenation will involve in-depth analysis and many adjustments. One aspect of this – rejuvenating the relationship between social-democratic parties and trade unions – is discussed in this piece. My argument is that the party-union link remains vital for the social-democratic movement, and that it offers institutional, financial and political resources that ‘civil society’ can in no way replace. What is more, a new relationship between the two sides can send two significant messages. First, that progressives are concerned with ‘real’ working people, rather than with the self-absorbed debates of yesterday; and secondly, that trade unions have a central role to play in the process of rebalancing the mixed economy, and can be relied upon to act in a spirit of responsibility to assist Europe’s recovery from the current slump.

What is remarkable about the party-union link is how much it has been underestimated by social democrats themselves. The ‘golden age’ was made possible by many different components, but one of them was certainly successful party-union links: these were instrumental in forging governmental coalitions that enhanced women’s rights, gave employees a say in the workplace and secured safe work conditions for employees. Even today, and despite all the changes that the link has gone through, unions continue to form the backbone of the progressive movement in a number of countries.

‘Third Way-ists’ often displayed in office the dismissive attitude towards trade unions that is characteristic of those who uncritically adopt neoliberal orthodoxy. Regarding unions as a historical relic, they rushed to pronounce the arrival of a post-ideological age, in which labour was an economic factor of only secondary value as compared to the glitz and glamour of financial capital.

The crisis has revealed the absurdity of that attitude, but – since it takes two to tango – the unions themselves also need to assume responsibility for the build-up of a new link with social-democratic parties. Their democratic functioning, representative character, corruption-free organisational structure and reformist credentials will be a crucial part of any attempt to place their relationship with progressive politics back on track.

Social democracy remains as relevant as ever in an age of rapid change. Insecurity and fear have crippled people's lives, and the absence of a sense of community has led to alienation from politics and distrust towards the political. A new party-union link can contribute to the restoration of the European social-democratic movement by once again forging a working-class/middle-class coalition, united in its defence of socio-economic rights and sustainable growth as the basis of the post-crisis settlement.

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