DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 06.06.2024 | Oliver Roethig

Trade unions can defeat Europe's far right

People who feel more empowered at work are less likely to agree with extreme-right arguments

In early June, European citizens will elect a new European Parliament. Polls predict that pro-European Union centrists will still prevail, albeit with a slim majority. Most worryingly, far-right parties are projected to make significant gains in many European countries, including Germany, France and Italy.

Political leaders from across the spectrum recognise the danger and are lining up to renounce any coalition with these parties. Nicolas Schmit, the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats' *Spitzenkandidat* (lead candidate for president of the European Commission), promised 'no cooperation with the far right'. The European Commission's current president, Ursula von der Leyen, the candidate of the centre-right European People's Party, made a similar pledge. She vowed to work only with 'clear supporters of our democratic values', though she is ambiguous about cooperating with the far-right European Conservatives and Reformists Group, which includes Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's party. The European Left's *Spitzenkandidat*, Walter Baier, said that 'fighting the far right is a moral and a cultural obligation', while the European Greens' lead candidates, Terry Reintke and Bas Eickhout, also pledged to 'fight the fascists'.

Research has shown a solid correlation between right-wing extremist attitudes and feelings of powerlessness in the workplace.

It is not particularly surprising that EU leaders agree on the far right's threat to democracy, the rule of law and the European social model. One need only look at Finland, where a coalition government featuring the populist Finns Party has launched an assault on workers' rights and the welfare state, to see the damage it can cause.

Trade unions hold the key to preventing Europe's extremists from gaining a greater foothold. Research has shown a solid correlation between right-wing extremist attitudes and feelings of powerlessness in

the workplace. The inverse is also true: people who feel more empowered at work are less likely to agree with far-right arguments. Fighting the far right thus calls for empowering workers and strengthening the trade unions that represent them.

Reason for hope

Across Europe, from Ireland to Germany, trade unions act as a bulwark of democracy. They counter misinformation through digital-skills trainings, provide educational materials about the anti-social voting record of far-right parties, mobilise their members to vote and organise demonstrations to rally the general public.

The 2023 elections in Spain are a case in point. When Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez called early elections after his Spanish Socialist Workers' Party suffered heavy losses in local polls, the right-wing nationalist Vox party was polling at 15-16 per cent — high enough to form a majority with the conservative Partido Popular.

But Vox received only 12.4 per cent of the vote, and Sánchez stayed in power, partly owing to a nationwide campaign launched by the major Spanish trade union federations *Unión General de Trabajadores* and *Comisiones Obreras*. They organised workplace assemblies and powerful digital campaigns to inform their members about Vox's anti-worker policies and highlight the progressive government's achievements: a significant increase in the minimum wage, a new labour code and better protections for gig workers.

73 per cent of EU citizens say they believe that their standard of living will decline this year.

If European leaders want to beat the far right, they need to abandon the failed neoliberal consensus that has disempowered workers. Over the past two years, many companies have earned enormous profits that have driven inflation and squeezed workers' real wages. At the same time, the EU is set to introduce new fiscal rules that could precipitate a return to austerity; the expected cuts to jobs, income and public services would further erode economic security for workers. With 73 per cent of EU citizens saying they believe that their standard of living will decline this year, such measures are bound to fuel discontent.

Fortunately, politicians have a wider range of policy options. Perhaps most promisingly, the EU set an 80 per cent target for collective-

bargaining coverage by adopting the Directive on Adequate Minimum Wages during the outgoing European Parliament's term. This could reverse the downward trend in coverage across the bloc and lead to more stable and equitable societies.

Next year, member states that have not met that target are obliged to present an action plan to boost collective bargaining. To that end, these countries' leaders should ensure a legislative and regulatory framework that gives people a real say at their workplace by increasing collective-bargaining coverage and promoting multi-employer bargaining.

Too often, unscrupulous employers illegally prevent workers from organising, or disregard the collective agreements workers won through their organising efforts.

European policymakers could help achieve this goal with a carrot-and-stick approach. The carrot is public money. Every year, public authorities in the EU spend 14 per cent of GDP – around €2 trillion ($2.2 trillion) – on purchases of goods and services. But flawed public-procurement rules across the bloc result in too many public contracts going to companies that violate labour rights, undercut competitors and deliver low-quality services.

Instead, the EU and its member states should use their spending power to support workers by rewarding companies that respect labour rights and advance social goals. As a first step, the European Commission should revise the Public Procurement Directive, a long-overdue change that has the backing of a multiparty alliance in the European Parliament and could lift living standards.

The law is the stick. Too often, unscrupulous employers illegally prevent workers from organising, or disregard the collective agreements workers won through their organising efforts. These union-busting tactics – and related misconduct, such as wage theft – are serious offenses, not petty crimes, with dire consequences for workers, and public authorities should treat them as such. The threat of longer and harsher prison sentences for union busting would discourage this criminal behaviour and, in turn, help counter the appeal of the far right.

As set out in Article 1 of the Treaty on European Union, the EU has a duty to deliver 'improved living and working conditions'. The bloc's leaders must follow through on this commitment, not merely recognising the danger posed by far-right parties but also taking tangible steps to reduce their influence. The next European Commission and Parliament should therefore focus on empowering workers, expanding their rights

and strengthening the trade unions that fight for their interests.

© Project Syndicate



Oliver Roethig
Brussels

Oliver Roethig heads UNI Europa, the European service workers union with seven million members, as its Regional Secretary, first elected in 2011. He is a member of the Management Committee of the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) and the Executive Board of UNI Global Union, which represents 20 million workers, since 2011.