

Seppo Tamminen

FinUnions:

25 years in Brussels
defending wage-earners

Summary in English

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This abridged version of the history of FinUnions has been prepared by Kari Tapiola, former Deputy Director-General of the ILO, who as International Affairs Director of SAK participated in the process from 1988 to 1996.

Finland's EU membership in the hands of the trade unions

In the preface to the anniversary book of FinUnions by **Seppo Tamminen**, the Presidents of the Central Organization of Finnish Trade Unions SAK and the Finnish Confederation of Technical Employees' Unions STTK, **Jarkko Eloranta** and **Antti Palola**, state that without exaggeration, the membership of Finland in the European Union was in the hands of the trade unions. Without their support the referendum on Finnish membership might have had a different result. The alternative history can only be imagined today.

Membership in the European Union welded together the central trade union organizations into a new kind of cooperation which, it is true, has had its ups and downs. A quarter of century ago the most important achievement was establishing a joint office in Brussels to advance the interests of members of all the unions.

Today, the future of Europe is once again at stake. The global financial crisis left deep wedges in the European family, and the coronavirus pandemic has made things worse. The way forward and upwards is being sought in a new economic and geopolitical constellation. China and the United States are competing for global hegemony and Russia is flexing its muscles as a major regional power. Europe must assert its position even if it remains internally divided and economically challenged.

Finland cannot manage alone, but the EU is sufficiently large to promote multilateral cooperation and rules-based international cooperation. Wage-earners have to look after their vital interests at home and in Europe. FinUnions will be needed for that in the coming years, too.

Getting everyone to see Brussels with their own eyes

When the issue of European integration became topical in Finland in the late 1980s, the most active participants in the debate were the industrial trade unions. Many of them, such as the Metalworkers' and Chemical Workers' Unions, had a long tradition of cooperation all over Europe. **Pekka O. Aro** returned from his international assignment as Deputy General Secretary of the International Chemical and Energy Workers' Federation to Finland in 1988. He and the President of the Chemical Workers' Union **Heikki Pohja** devised the idea of a project which would map out the impact of the new European internal market on Finnish industry and the steps that the trade unions would have to take. This led into setting up in 1989 a Europe project of industrial unions on Europe (TEPE) managed by Aro.

The project included unions affiliated to SAK, STTK and the Confederation of Salaried Employees TVK. In addition to gathering information on the consequences of European integration to the wage earners, the project was designed to improve awareness and training on international affairs and support European contacts of its member unions. TEPE identified some 40 areas where Finnish enterprises would meet challenges in competing in an integrating Europe.

Trade union leaders had already been inspired by discussions with the President of the European Commission, **Jacques Delors**, who visited Finland in July 1988. Delors in turn was impressed by the trade unions' cooperation and strong position in the Finnish economy and society.

In November 1989 the Government of Finland announced it would join the negotiations for a European Economic Area (EEA). Finland

had become a full member of the European Free Trade Area (EFTA) and supported further cooperation between it and the European Union as long as the official policy of neutrality was not endangered.

Trade union cooperation expanded from the industrial unions to their central organizations. In 1990 the four central organizations (SAK, TVK, STTK and the Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff AKAVA) decided to have a joint European project. The Finnish trade union scene was modified in 1992 when TVK went bankrupt and most of its affiliated unions regrouped in the STTK.

Pekka O. Aro continued to lead the new project. Its full name in Finnish produced the acronym KEY. The project became the key to acquiring and processing knowledge; helping the unions to recognize the effects of integration; and observing the effects of international change on trade unions. An extensive network of up to 200 active trade unionists attended seminars and training and received regular information through newsletters and special briefs. At the time the internet was not yet the primary information channel it is today.

The KEY project made members of trade unions' executive bodies, opinion leaders and grass-root activists familiar with European integration. Through regular discussions with government negotiators, the trade unions kept abreast in real time with the process which was to lead to Finland's membership in the European Economic Area. However, the target soon shifted to full membership in the European Union. In their meetings with government negotiators, the trade unions raised their concerns about the future of social protection and the Finnish collective bargaining system.

The target of KEY was that everyone involved in the governance of Finnish trade unions would physically visit Brussels and see with

their own eyes what integration was about. When it would be time to decide, nobody could say that they were not sufficiently informed.

KEY shaped the opinions of its target group – trade union members in a country with one of the world’s highest unionization rates. When it became clear that the negotiations were about membership, this meant that a popular referendum would take place. All central organizations were in favour of EU membership. They trusted that extensive research and information work would enable trade union members to decide how to vote.

KEY organized meetings and seminars for the central organizations and their member unions both jointly and separately. It brought union leaders from EU countries to speak about their experience. The General Secretary of the British TUC, **John Monks**, was well received when he explained why during the years **Margaret Thatcher** was Prime Minister, the unions had found support from the social dialogue that accompanied European integration.

The negotiations for Finland’s membership in the European Union were successfully concluded on 1 March 1994. In the consultative referendum in October that year, 56.9 per cent of voters supported EU membership. The participation rate was around 74 per cent. The Finnish Parliament voted 152 to 45 in favour of joining the EU. One month after membership entered in force the trade union’s European project moved to a new location, the International Trade Union House in Brussels. Officially it was now called “KEY-Finland, SAK-STTK-AKAVA”.

Source of information and a base for trade unionists

The first Director of KEY-Finland in Brussels, ***Pekka Ahmavaara***, was primarily involved in networking. This was needed at multiple levels: with employers and other Finnish representatives in Brussels, with the government officials who attended meetings of the EU, with the European institutions and with Members of the European Parliament. The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), to which all Finnish central organizations were affiliated, was first somewhat wary of the offices that national trade union offices established in Brussels, but it soon invited them to participate in its meetings.

Heikki Pohja took the reins of the office in 1996. KEY-Finland constructed systematically a database on issues, which were vital for the trade unions. Sources ranged from the information and publication unit of DG V in the European Commission, press conferences of the Council of Ministers, the services of the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the European Court of Justice to the daily publication Agence Europe. In addition, the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) and other trade union offices in Brussels provided information and contacts. KEY-Finland launched its own internet page in 1996.

In the internet era the Director of KEY-Finland could punch one single computer key and instantly reach the over 200 persons on its address list. An information bulletin was transmitted to elected union representatives and shop stewards. An internet home page in English distributed news on the Finnish trade unions to a European public.

KEY-Finland soon became more than a source of information and contacts. It provided a base for the growing number of Finnish trade

unionists, leaders and experts, for whom Europe became a regular field of activity. The office had 1,300 visitors in 1997, and the following year it hosted 56 groups.

In the late 1990s the agenda was topped by employment policy, social dialogue, and information and consultation arrangements for employees. In 1997 an amendment to the EU directive on part-time work ensured that the Finnish health insurance system would not be weakened. The Directors of KEY-Finland and the Finnish employers' representation in Brussels were involved in the negotiations.

Euphoria around the EU peaked in July 1999, when simultaneously with the start of the first presidency of Finland of the Union, the Congress of the European Trade Union Confederation took place in Helsinki. The timing was not ideal: the Commission presided by **Jacques Santer** had stepped down after losing the confidence of the European Parliament, and the incoming President **Romano Prodi** was only discreetly present at the ETUC Congress.

From processing information to influencing decisions

In 2000 it was the turn of STTK to appoint the next KEY-Finland Director. **Jorma Skippari** took over an office with a recognized position in Brussels and a well-managed communication system. The Director travelled frequently to Finland, as the interest in the EU remained high among the trade unions and they wanted to receive direct news from Brussels. The most topical questions were the effects of the monetary union, strategies for European collective bargaining and corporate social responsibility.

Finland adopted the euro. The Finnish trade unions were confident that the common currency would bring inflation and interest rates

under control. There was no national referendum as the principle of a common currency had already been accepted when Finland voted to join the EU.

In May 2004 the EU took in ten new members. In anticipation KEY-Finland had extended its information network to the Estonian trade unions, as many of their officials understood Finnish. One natural consequence of neighbouring Estonia's EU-membership was an increase in especially construction workers in Finland. EU legislation was to guarantee that the national collective bargaining agreements would cover the rights of foreign workers, but in reality, the Western European labour markets developed a wide grey and illegal segment.

By the time the former President of the Finnish Paperworkers' Union, **Jarmo Lähteenmäki**, became Director of KEY-Finland, in 2004, the EU had become part of everyday life. The optimism of the earlier years had dissipated. Deepening integration forced the trade unions to attend to ever more detailed questions. What was more difficult was to determine an over-all trade union strategy towards the EU.

The Commission which **Jose Manuel Barroso** presided as of 2004 prioritized economic questions while the European trade unions wanted to give more weight to the social dimension. Despite their active lobbying with the Members of the European Parliament and the inputs of the Economic and Social Committee, social questions often remained at the level of official statements.

In 2006 it was AKAVA's turn to claim the Director's post in KEY-Finland. The result was a new constellation with two Directors, **Ari Åberg**, who had been Communications Director of AKAVA, and SAK's lawyer **Jorma Rusanen**. The joint representation was renamed "Finnish Trade Unions – EU representation". It soon became known as FinUnions.

The model with two Directors functioned well. Both could flexibly ensure contacts and interaction in Brussels and report back to trade union meetings in Finland. They focused increasingly on influencing the decisions of the European institutions. Of particular importance for AKAVA was the revision of the directive on working time, which had not covered higher professional categories. FinUnions lobbied for a draft which would have excluded only the highest executives from working time regulations. The European Parliament agreed in 2009, but the European Council did not. Another attempt to revisit the directive failed in 2012 – 2014.

In 2006 – 2007 FinUnions followed closely a conflict in which the Finnish Seafarers' Union had threatened the cruise company Viking Line with a strike over the collective bargaining coverage of foreign crew members. Viking Line took the Finnish union and the International Transport Workers' Federation to the European Court of Justice. In 2007 the Court confirmed that the right to strike was part of the fundamental rights of workers even when its effect was to restrict the free movement of labour.

The number of trade union leaders visiting Brussels grew, and the two Directors were busy with briefing them. Communications activity was now managed by two assistants, and the electronic mailing list had over 400 names. The items of highest interest were negotiations on the directives on information and consultation of the employees, services, the posted workers' enforcement directive as well as preparations for legislation on sulphur, working time and hours of work of drivers.

FinUnions returned to a single director system in 2009 with an agreement of future rotation between the central organizations. The International Affairs Director of STTK, **Risto Kousa**, became Director in 2010. SAK placed one of its officials, **Reijo Paananen**, in Brussels

on a part-time basis, in particular to maintain contacts with Members of the European Parliament. AKAVA did not take up the offer to send an own representative to the joint office.

In April 2012 STTK sent **Marianne Muona** to replace Kousa; she had just prepared a strategy on influencing the European institutions, and it was immediately taken over by FinUnions. The idea was to coordinate the positions of the three Finnish central organizations for the negotiations on a new directive on public procurement. The existing directive did not cover the conditions of workers and their job security. FinUnions collaborated with Members of the European Parliament, and a social clause was included in the directive.

Defending social achievements

Following communications trends, FinUnions started to use Facebook. Its internet pages contained more blogs from its network, including Members of the European Parliament. The trade unions' stated priorities for 2013 were tripartite coordination of economic and employment policies, a European strategy of occupational safety and health and achieving a youth guarantee.

In early 2014 **Pekka Ristelä**, international official of SAK, became the new Director. The Barroso Commission had produced few improvements for the workers. For the trade unions the enforcement directive on posted workers and the directives on mobile and seasonal workers were in principle welcome but half-hearted measures. The Commission presided by **Jean-Claude Juncker** took a different view towards trade unions. In the light of continuous issues on the contracts of foreign workers it underlined that equal pay was to be guaranteed to everyone at the workplaces.

In 2015 the Juncker Commission launched the idea of a social rights' pillar to complement the EU's fundamental rights in labour markets and social protection. A European Labour Authority was set up to intervene when social benefits were withheld or conditions of work fell short of standards.

It was AKAVA's turn in 2016 to designate a Director. Instead, it announced that it would leave FinUnions, preferring to pursue direct contacts. During some months its Federation of Professional and Managerial Staff YTN, which regrouped the majority of its AKAVA's affiliates, remained in FinUnions. Then it left as AKAVA was preparing to open its own office in Brussels.

The new Director of FinUnions was **Alexi Kuusisto**, a SAK expert on international affairs and especially trade policy. The four strategic priorities established for 2017 were a European Monetary Union and a Social Europe supporting employment and growth; an open and fair internal market; open and fair global markets; and a safe working environment. FinUnions and its employer counterpart EK arranged joint events to prepare for the consequences of Brexit. The roots of the populism spreading in Europe called for more analysis and cooperation.

The administration of FinUnions had moved between the Finnish trade union centres together with the post of Director. As of early 2017 it was transformed into an independent registered association. Among other things this meant the end of the rotation of Directors. The next one would be recruited through a public call of candidates.

In September 2019 **Katja Lehto-Komulainen**, former Deputy Secretary-General of the ETUC, was appointed Director of FinUnions. The new Commission of **Ursula von der Leyen** was installed towards the end of Finland's third presidency of the EU, with **Jutta Urpilai-**

nen as Commissioner in charge of partnerships. The beginning was promising, with proposals for EU legislation on minimum wages and gender pay transparency. The agenda also included improving the position of platform workers, occupational safety and health, combating climate change, promoting green growth, and digitalization.

Then in 2020 much of the EU was closed down because of the coronavirus. Both the European Institutions and the delegations and organizations interacting with them moved to distance work. This included the office of FinUnions, too. Meetings were still held virtually, and the legislative work of the EU continued. But with little travel and physical formal and informal contacts, the essential business carried out lacked the touch which human interaction gives to international work. As the 25th anniversary publication of FinUnions went to print, further waves of the pandemic continued but people had started meeting one another again.

The importance of being there

The pandemic has been another reminder of the importance of physical presence. The history of FinUnions is part of Finland's drive to be present in the centre of decision making. It has been the eyes and ears of Finnish trade unions in the chambers where decisions are prepared and made. As the former President of SAK, **Lauri Lyly**, has observed, the more you are involved in international organizations, the better prepared you are to deal with issues at home. But the scope of is enormous. As her predecessors and others who have worked in Brussels, Katja Lehto-Komulainen underlines how challenging it is to deal with an entity of thousands and thousands of officials and a status-conscious hierarchy.

The representation of the Norwegian trade unions in Brussels has had the same Director, **Knut Arne Sanden**, since it was founded in 1995. Next door in the International Trade Union House, during the same period FinUnions has had 11 Directors. Yet what may have been lost in stability has been compensated by a larger number of key trade union actors whose toolkit has been significantly enriched by their experience in Brussels. There is enough to build upon for the next 25 years.

The indispensable assistants

Bertoldt Brecht wrote that according to history, Caesar conquered Gaul, and added the question, didn't he at least take a cook along? The full text of the history of FinUnions devotes much attention to the assistants and collaborators who made the work of the Directors possible. Among other things, much of the successes of the communications work is due to them.

When KEY shuttled from the offices of SAK to TVK and then to the STTK premises in Finland, Pekka O. Aro was assisted by **Maisa Vuorenmaa**. **Paula Repo** conducted research on the effects of the internationalization of capital markets, and **Jukka Kallio** ran a project on integration and occupational safety and health. When TVK ceased its activities, its international secretary **Päivikki Lindroos** became project officer, supporting Pekka Ahmavaara after Pekka O. Aro had moved to the ILO's Budapest office. She was followed by her former secretary **Kaija Kaarnakorpi**. In the run-up to the referendum on EU membership, **Simo Komulainen** conducted a mapping of the trade union media, and information to the unions' publications was served by **Maarit Harjusalmi**. **Tom Saxén** from SAK arranged seminars and study trips and coordinated studies on social and economic policies and equality. KEY also organized training for debates and television appearances.

Once in Brussels, KEY-Finland engaged on a permanent basis a multilingual assistant, **Aila Seppälä**. Information sources in Brussels were mapped with the help of **Ilkka Lehtinen**. A comparative report on constitutional issues to be dealt with by the 1996 intergovernmental conference was prepared by a visiting researcher **Pia Sirola**.

Aila Seppälä graduated from a marketing institute with a comparative study of eight national trade union representations in Brussels

and was increasingly responsible for communications. She returned to Finland in 2006. For a while in 2010 **Eeva Katri** was the assistant.

In 2012 **Matleena Virkkunen** prepared a new communications strategy for FinUnions and then moved on to the Finnish Foreign Ministry. Her successor **Meiju Keksi**, helped by **Sanni Halla-aho** from SAK, restructured the internet pages in 2013. After Keksi left in 2016 **Tiina Huotari** was engaged as an assistant. Together with Katja Lehto-Komulainen she moved to distance work when the coronavirus pandemic struck.

The Finnish network in Brussels

When integration started to proceed, the Finnish trade unions met regularly with the officials in charge of negotiations. This included the Minister for Foreign Trade, **Pertti Salolainen**, and the Foreign Ministry's high officials **Veli Sundbäck**, **Antti Satuli** and **Eikka Kosonen**. The leaders of all trade unions and other participants of study tours to Brussels (virtually the whole internal Europe network of the unions), met with Ambassador **Erkki Liikanen** and Labour Market Councillor **Tuuli Raivio**. There was a continuous exchange of information with the employers, who already had an office in Brussels headed by **Kari Jalas**. The European Trade Union Confederation and the different branch secretariats were naturally part of the network.

Once the office had been established in Brussels, it could be in touch with the ETUC, which was also located in the International Trade Union House. Its General Secretaries during the years have been **Emilio Gabaglio**, **John Monks**, **Bernadette Ségol** and **Luca Visenti**. Relations were maintained with the offices of other national trade unions and in particular those of Nordic countries. **Heikki Aintila** worked in the European Trade Union Institute, **Jari Hellstén** in the European construction workers' federation and **Jyrki Raina** in that of chemical and energy workers.

The Finnish Commissioner Erkki Liikanen and his successor, **Olli Rehn**, and their staff were regularly in touch with the trade unions, and the current Commissioner **Jutta Urpilainen** has continued the practice. Relations have been maintained in particular with Finnish officials who in the European Commission dealt with social affairs and employment or communications, such as **Juhani Lönnroth**, **Reijo Kemppinen**, **Anneli Pauli** and **Antti Peltomäki**.

An integral part of the network are contacts that FinUnions maintains with the Brussels offices of the Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK), the Central Organization of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners (MTK), the Finland Chamber of Commerce and the Association of Finnish Municipalities.

As the importance of the European Parliament has grown, FinUnions has increasingly interacted with its Members. A particular mention is made of **Lasse Lehtinen** and his assistant **Mika Domisch** in connection with the working time directive. Other significant contacts were with **Liisa Jaakonsaari**, **Ville Itälä**, **Sirpa Pietikäinen**, **Miapetra Kumpula-Natri** and **Heidi Hautala**.

