

FinUnions:

30 years Advocating
for a Social Europe



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The Early Days of the Finnish Trade Unions' European Advocacy

European advocacy by the trade unions began to take shape in the early 1970s. Under the umbrella of the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), which was founded in 1973 by several national confederations from EU countries, sector-specific European trade union secretariats started to emerge in the 1980s. Through these structures, many Finnish trade unions gained the opportunity to follow EU-level decision-making.

Traditional Nordic cooperation also remained an important window into international advocacy for Finnish trade unions.

In Finland, unions in the industrial sector had gained practical experience with the operations of multinational companies. Especially during the 1980s, Finnish companies began expanding their activities abroad. This development increased the need for cross-border cooperation among trade unions. I experienced this firsthand while working as a lawyer for the Chemical Workers' Union from 1979, and later as its president from 1984, when Finnish chemical companies increasingly began investing abroad.

TEPE – The European Project of Finnish Industrial Trade Unions

By the late 1980s, Finnish industrial unions saw the need to prepare for the emergence of the European internal market. In 1989, we decided to establish the European Project of Finnish Industrial Trade Unions, or TEPE. It included 11 trade

unions. The aim was to analyze the development of the European Communities into a more integrated internal market and its implications for Finnish industrial workers. Lawyer **Pekka O. Aro** was hired to lead the project. In addition to my role as president of the Chemical Workers' Union, I also chaired the TEPE project.

In May 1992, we published a report concluding that Finland's accession to the European Economic Area (EEA) or the European Communities (EC) would not weaken the rights of Finnish workers. This conclusion was based on extensive discussions and investigations both within Finland and among the European trade union movement. My interest in developing European cooperation and advocacy became firmly established.

From EU Project to Confederations and Brussels

In 1991, the industrial unions' EU project was transferred to the national trade union confederations. Initially led by Pekka O. Aro, and later by **Pekka Ahmavaara**, the project — now called KEY (European Cooperation of Central Organizations) — was relocated to Brussels in spring 1995.

In the summer of 1995, I was offered the position of leading KEY-Finland in Brussels when the role would become vacant in 1996. The governing bodies of the Finnish trade union confederations approved my appointment in October 1995.

My work in Brussels began on July 1, 1996. The office location was well chosen. Pekka Ahmavaara had built a strong network and hired an excellent assistant, **Aila Seppälä**. Internet-based communication systems were developing rapidly, making in-

formation gathering and email distribution increasingly efficient. Communication became even more streamlined.

The first Finnish EU Commissioner, **Erkki Liikanen**, and Finland's EU Ambassador, **Antti Satuli**, organized monthly confidential background briefings for Finnish interest group representatives, and the cooperation worked very well. We had good connections with many Finnish officials in various EU institutions, as well as with Finnish Members of the European Parliament and their assistants. Cooperation between national trade union offices from different countries was close and beneficial, and interaction with European trade union organizations located in the same building was also strong.

Optimism and Enthusiasm in the EU

My time as Director coincided with the early years of Finland's EU membership — a period I now recall as exciting and full of promise. There was a strong belief in deeper cooperation between Member States and positive economic development. For workers, it was encouraging that employment and workers' rights were becoming increasingly important themes.

Dozens of visitor groups from Finland came to Brussels during those years, giving us opportunities to present current EU developments. These meetings were always fruitful and helped refine our own assessments of different aspects of integration. They are everlasting positive memories.

It has since been somewhat saddening to witness the serious setbacks faced by European cooperation — the Euro crisis and Brexit, for instance. The rise of nationalism in various member states and beyond has undermined citizens' trust in the bene-

fits of cooperation. I can imagine that many of my successors have at times found the work demanding and less rewarding.

Nevertheless, it's important to remember the fundamentals: the European Union is a peace project meant to generate growing prosperity for all its Member States and their citizens. Together we can always achieve more than we can as isolated nation-states. History offers many lessons to support this truth.

Heikki Pohja

Director for KEY-Finland 1996–2000

**"THE RISE OF NATIONALISM IN VARIOUS MEMBER STATES
AND BEYOND HAS UNDERMINED CITIZENS' TRUST IN THE BENEFITS OF COOPERATION".**

From Fellow Candidates for EU Membership to Trade Union Neighbors in Brussels

The cooperation between the Norwegian and the Finnish trade unions goes years back. Side by side Norway and Finland applied for EU Membership in 1994 after finishing an economic agreement between the EFTA and the EU-countries (EEA). This became a starting point for a long-lasting trade union cooperation and friendship between the countries.

The first of July 1994 was an important day in the life of four EFTA-countries; Austria, Sweden, Norway and Finland. That very day, the EU opened the doors for diplomats from those countries into a secret world called COREPER. This is the abbreviation for the Committee of Permanent Representatives, which prepares all the important issues in the European Union that should be decided by the government ministers from each EU country.

I took part in COREPER as a labour attaché in the Norwegian Mission to the EU, representing Norway LO until 28 November 1994. A historical date when a plebiscite among the Norwegian people for the second time turned down EU membership with 52,3 percent.

I recall this as a time when diplomats from the four permanent missions in Brussels should “train” to be a member country, a trial period. We could talk and propose, but our opinions could mean something or nothing.

Sweden turned out to be “a wannabe superpower” presenting

opinions on a lot of issues and often before the big three, the UK (at that time), Germany and France, two of the founding fathers, would ask for the floor.

Austria was lucky to speak in the country's local variant of German, while everyone else used a mixed level of English.

The Norwegians put forward occasional proposals, often accepted, which was thought to be helpful for a yes vote in the coming referendum, but at the end it had no effect.

The Finns sat there quietly, learning how to play this new European game consisting of 12 members and four "maybe" Members States. Suddenly Finland raised its name plate (Suomi-Finland). Slightly surprised by this, the others listened to the short and very concise remark which was to the point. Finland caught everybody's attention by, firstly, having a good remark and secondly, by talking about something that was of great importance to Finland. Finland gained respect for their quiet and respectful manner.

On the 29th of November the name plate for Norway was removed. I and my Norwegian colleagues left COREPER, and by that an era came to an end.

Office Buddies

I returned to the LO office, which at that time had a rental space in the House of the Swedish Trade Union Brussels Office. In January 1995 we moved into the brand-new International Trade Union House ITUH. LO Norway became neighbors with the Finnish Trade Union Office and both of us were located close by the conference rooms where all the meetings were held in the building.

From that moment onwards, a close cooperation began between the Norwegian Office and the Finnish Trade Union organizations represented in Brussels. Cooperation was important in a European context. Finland was a Member State, Norway was not. Finland had their Commissioner, **Erkki Liikanen**. We had none. Finland had their MEPs. We had none.

For my own part, I see what Finland has gained for being part of the European union. The Finnish trade unions got access to much more information about what was going on in the EU. I could not read their reports in Finnish, but we informed each other in other ways.

One of the advantages that I had was access to the ETUC secretariat and their meetings. Finland was represented by their three trade union member organizations from Helsinki, while their office staff in Brussels often was excluded from the meetings at that time. Sharing information and building good personal relations in Brussels became ever so important.

The Nordic Sphere

In addition, we had a very close Nordic cooperation among the Finnish, the Danish and Swedish Trade Union Offices. One part of this close cooperation was once or twice a year going to Strasbourg to meet MEPs from the S&D group.

The Nordics represented the “Nordic model” of working life. The EU can be regarded as a legislative machinery, for good and bad. As we all know, the European Trade Union movement has always fought for a Social Europe, but what the social dimension should consist of might differ from country to country. In the Nordic model, collective agreements are

important, while southern trade unions often asked for European legislation for issues they could not achieve at national level. Therefore, there has been a difference of opinion on matters such as the posting of workers, working time and adequate minimum wages among others.

EU Membership is still a difficult subject in Norway after twice being voted down. In 1991, I said to the LO Norway President that Finland might join the European union before Norway, and even the Monetary Union. He did not believe me, but how right I was, indeed.

Times are changing rapidly. Now Finland and Sweden have joined NATO, bringing for the first time five Nordic countries together in the same alliance in an unsafe world. Let us not forget that the Nordic Trade Unions have worked side by side in The Council of Nordic Trade Unions NFS since the 1960's to foster cooperation and make unions strong. Nordic cooperation will remain important also in a growing European context.

Norway It is

At this moment, I am back in my hometown in Norway, but Brussels will always have a special place in my heart and stomach. I lived in Belgium over 31 years. I moved to Brussel with my family in 1991, worked for the LO Norway from 1994 until 2022.

What do I miss the most? “Moules et frites” of course. And talking with trade unions friends in different languages.

Knut Arne Sanden

Head of the Norwegian Trade Union Office (LO) in Brussels
1994–2022

The ITUC and FinUnions: A Shared Global Trade Union Vision

Many congratulations to FinUnions on 30 years of working hard for the interests of working people in Brussels, at the heart of the European institutions. It is a moment for reflection and recognition – to look back not just at what you have achieved for working in Finland, but at the vital role Finnish trade unions have played far beyond Europe's borders.

I saw this personally during my time at IndustriAll Europe. Whether standing with workers in the global South, defending trade union rights at the International Labour Organization, or supporting democratic transitions in conflict-affected countries, Finnish trade unions have consistently shown leadership. Their presence in Brussels through FinUnions ensured that the Finnish voice was not only heard in the corridors of the European institutions but also echoed in international struggles for workers' dignity.

Worker's Rights, Democracy and Peace at The Core

We have a shared global struggle as trade unions: for workers' rights, for democracy and for peace.

However, we are at a time of profound uncertainty in Finland, Europe and the world. Inequality is growing. Authoritarianism is on the rise. As clearly shown in the ITUC Global Rights Index, in too many countries, democratic rights—including trade union rights—are being rolled back. Finland's rating in the 2024 Index worsening from 1 to 2 (repeated violations of rights) was shocking, but also a wake-up call.

The voices of working people are being ignored, and the very fabric of democratic society is under threat.

In response, the ITUC has launched a global campaign for Democracy That Delivers for Working People. It is a call to action, a rallying cry to reclaim democracy from corporate greed and political complacency. This means starting in the workplace with trade union rights for all workers, including platform and informal workers. From there, working people can build democratic societies that deliver a New Social Contract, built on universal social protection, just taxation of billionaires, investment in care and climate-friendly jobs, and a fair economic order that puts people before profit.

The vision of a New Social Contract cannot be achieved without the strength of national trade union movements. Here, the Finnish trade unions—through SAK and STTK—have always been a source of inspiration. Their global engagement has been a central expression of Finland’s deep-rooted commitment to democracy, multilateralism and international solidarity.

Thinking Globally, Acting Locally

Indeed, the legacy of Finnish trade unionism is defined by values that resonate globally: trust in collective solutions, a commitment to fair negotiation, and a belief in the power of education and dialogue. These values have been brought to life in countless ways—through development cooperation projects, global solidarity actions, and tireless support for democratic trade union partners across the world.

At the ITUC, we believe that democracy and trade unionism are inseparable. You cannot have one without the other. As

the world's largest social, democratic movement, trade unions have the collective power to achieve great things. And in our fight to defend and win for working people, we rely on the kind of principled engagement that FinUnions and its member organisations have long embodied.

As we look ahead, this global role will only become more important. The climate crisis, technological transformation, and increasing global inequality all demand coordinated trade union action—across borders, across sectors, and across ideologies. That's why we support strong alliances between unions from the North and South, building inclusive labour movements, and ensuring that the fight for social justice is never confined by geography.

The Story Will Continue

FinUnions' 30-year presence in Brussels is more than a story of European representation. It is a story of how a small country's trade union movement has helped shape the global conversation on workers' rights, democracy and peace.

For that, I say: thank you. Kiitos. We need your continued voice, strength and solidarity in the years ahead. The international trade union movement stands on your shoulders—and together, we will continue to build a world that truly delivers for workers.

Solidarity always.

Luc Triangle
General Secretary, ITUC

Finland has Gained Three Decades of Security, Stability, and Prosperity

Finland is celebrating 30 years of EU membership this year.

For many Finns, the shared history of Finland and European integration seems to begin with Finland's 1992 membership application. Earlier developments are often seen as "someone else's history", as integration history scholars from Turku, **Louis Clerc** and **Kimmo Elo**, have described in their Finnish book "Aatteesta instituutioksi".

Finland jumped on a moving train that had left the station 50 years earlier.

France and Germany had found common ground, first in the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951 and then in the European Economic Community (EEC) established in 1957. Six core countries were involved. Similarly, the UK, Sweden, and other peripheral countries formed the European Free Trade Association EFTA, a traditional free trade area without supranational institutions.

From Finland's perspective, the developments moved slowly in a better direction. During President **Kekkonen's** era, Finland westernized, even though the Soviet Union tried to maintain its grip and Finlandization stifled the political atmosphere. Finland negotiated associate membership in EFTA 1961 and a free trade agreement with the EEC in 1974. Meanwhile, cooperation deepened, and the EEC expanded from six to nine and later twelve member states.

Under **Jacques Delors**, President of the European Commission, the EU undertook a major internal market program. The Community became a Union, and the EEC became the EU. Even an agreement was reached on an Economic and Monetary Union and a common currency. In the aftermath of the Cold War, France accepted German reunification, and Germany relinquished the Bundesbank's dominant role in monetary policy. This led to the creation of the Euro and the European Central Bank.

All of this was part of the moving train that Finland jumped on in 1992 when it applied for membership. It was understood that Finland and other candidate countries had to accept all EU laws up to that point, known as the “*acquis communautaire*”. Of course, tough negotiations took place, particularly regarding agricultural policy but not in security policy.

Getting to know the Finnish Trade Union's EU Office during my MEP years

When Finland's EU membership was confirmed in autumn 1994, the Finnish Parliament appointed 16 representatives who began working in Brussels and Strasbourg on 1 January 1995. I already felt quite experienced in European affairs—though still relatively young—when I had the honor of boarding the train and shifting from being a Member of the Finnish Parliament to an MEP. During the early years of Finland's EU membership, I participated in European legislative and parliamentary work, which differed in many ways from my previous role as a national MP.

As a new MEP, I was in close contact with many Finnish stakeholder organizations that had become represented in Brussels due to EU membership. One of them was the Euro-

pean cooperation of Finnish trade union confederations, KEY Finland, led by **Heikki Pohja**. I highly value the expertise and enthusiasm Heikki and other early EU representatives, both from the trade unions and employer organizations, brought to Finnish and European discussions about the opportunities and challenges of integration.

The Finnish trade union representation to the EU or FinUnions has worked with long-term commitment in Brussels for 30 years, advocating for workers and promoting constructive social dialogue. This is a remarkable achievement, much like Finland's EU membership itself.

What has Finland gained from 30 years in the European Union?

First: After the Cold War, Finland found its place. We were now part of the West. The security policy dimension was strongly present. It is undoubtedly fair to say that the EU has been our most important frame of reference since 1995.

Second: The Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), symbolized most visibly by our common currency, the Euro, has been a significant step forward. The internal market was substantially completed when the Euro was introduced.

Third: The Schengen Agreement. From 2001 onward, free movement allowed Finns to travel in many European countries without border formalities.

In conclusion, Finland has gained much from the EU: security, stability, and prosperity.

Finland has not only been a beneficiary. We have also contributed greatly to the development of the European Union. In the early years, Finland was an active, constructive, and respected new member. For example, we actively took part in the third stage of the Economic and Monetary Union, being one of the first member states to do so. This was an important signal.

Our first EU presidency in 1999 was a major effort that paid off. When you do your best, you are rewarded. This is how **Petri Tuomi-Nikula**, then Head of the EU Presidency Secretariat, described it in his excellent Finnish book “Erilaista diplomaattia”.

Commitment to European integration has formed a long-standing direction in Finland’s history and the foundation for our national success. When there has been war or recession in Europe, Finland has suffered. When there has been peace and stable economic growth, Finland has done well.

The European Union, a union of 27 member states, works to strengthen peace and prosperity, which is why Finland has chosen the EU path. In our own interest, Finland’s European choice must not be subject to short-term policy considerations. Especially in these turbulent times, the EU as a political community means national security for us, and solid backing in both security and trade policy.

Olli Rehn

Governor of the Bank of Finland

Olli Rehn served as a Member of the European Parliament from 1995 to 1996 and 2014 to 2015 and as a European Commissioner from 2004 to 2014.

The Trade Union Movement Is Needed Now More Than Ever

Between 2007 and 2010, when I was leading FinUnions, Social Europe and its defense were central themes in the EU. First and foremost, the Working Time Directive deserves to be mentioned. During lobbying efforts regarding its content, we maintained extensive contacts not only with the left but also with the moderate right, the parties in the centre, and the Greens. This broad-based approach paid off. The Parliament ultimately voted for a directive that pleased the trade union movement. Unfortunately, the directive stalled in the Council during the Czech Presidency, which was a major disappointment.

Another important issue was the revision of the Directive on European Works Councils, which was achieved in 2009. However, the reform remained incomplete because the new directive did not require older, previously established Works Councils to align their operations to the updated directive. At the time of writing, negotiations on the revision of the directive have just been concluded, and the final text is still awaiting formal approval from the Parliament and the Council.

There was also progress in securing the right to strike. In December 2007, a court ruling confirmed that the right to strike is part of the EU's fundamental rights. After this, the court issued similar rulings in three other cases. FinUnions also took part in the advocacy and communication efforts surrounding the Viking Line vs. Seamen's Union case, which was pending in court. The case involved an attempt to undermine working conditions through re-flagging.

Broad-Based Advocacy

I worked in Brussels as the Director of FinUnions from April 2007 to March 2010. For most of that time, **Jorma Rusanen** from the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions SAK also served as a leader. We had excellent cooperation and a strong dynamic which allowed us to push forward in advocacy work with full force. We maintained and developed broad-ranging contacts with key political groups and administrative staff.

For the trade union movement to achieve positive results, it was essential to focus advocacy efforts on centre-right, centre-left, and centre party representatives. Had we limited ourselves, for example, only to left-wing groups, we could not have been sure of the outcome. In the current European Parliament, broad-based advocacy is even more crucial, as the balance of power has shifted in favor of the right-wing groups. For wage earners, the result matters most—not the artistic impression. That's why I encourage open-minded cooperation initiatives, excluding only the political extremes.

Extremist Movements Are a Threat to Democracy

Even during my time in Brussels, the rise of populism was becoming evident. These political groups used Euroscepticism as their main rallying cry. Combined with xenophobia—hostility toward foreigners—this has brought significant success to Europe's far-right and extreme-right parties. They have risen to power in countries like Slovakia, Hungary, and Italy. Poll numbers are also strong in Germany and France. In Poland's presidential elections, the far-right candidate gained significant support this time with support from Trump-style conservatives. The rise of the far right in Europe, combined with

the entrenched power of the far right in Russia, casts a chilling shadow over the future of our continent.

The Trade Union Movement as a Bridge-Builder in Uncertain Times

Politically and economically uncertain times increase the chances of extremist movements succeeding. The nationalist surge is a major threat to the very existence of the EU. To counter this trend, we need the trade union movement—more than ever. We need the trade union movement to act as a bridge-builder for cooperation among moderate forces. We are also needed to promote the fundamental elements of a dignified life and a secure future. In doing so, we can diminish the breeding ground for populism and extremism and strengthen the stability of our society based on Western values.

The trade union movement needs broad shoulders now. Internal disputes and turf wars between organizations must be put aside! This is important both at the European and national levels. Regarding Finland, I would paraphrase the Roman senator **Marcus Porcius Cato**: “Moreover, I consider that the departure of Akava, the Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland, from FinUnions was a great mistake.” Broader shoulders are needed, and for that reason, Akava should reconsider its decision, especially now, with new leadership in the central organization.

Best of luck to FinUnions now and in the future!

Ari Åberg

Director for FinUnions 2007–2010

The Trade Union Movement is Part of a Functioning Democracy and The EU's Community of Values

The Finnish trade union movement has defended workers' interests in Brussels for as long as Finland has been a member of the EU – 30 years. Today, the joint advocacy organisation of SAK and STTK is FinUnions. Its important tasks are to safeguard the interests of Finnish workers in the EU institutions, to take an active role in international trade union organisations and networks, and to convey up-to-date information to Finland about EU projects and plans on issues relevant to workers and the trade union movement.

The Finnish trade union movement had a positive stance on Finland's EU membership already in the early 1990s and during the membership process. One could even say that this positive attitude influenced the outcome of the referendum in such a way that today we can celebrate both 30 years of EU membership and 30 years of Finnish trade union advocacy work in Brussels. In these uncertain and troubling times, one can only imagine what Finland's position would be if we had not applied and joined the EU back then. We need to express our gratitude to the wise trade union leaders and decision-makers of that time, who clearly recognised the changes in the world, ongoing developments, and Finland's best interests.

Achieving Results Through Negotiating

EU membership has of course not been a bed of roses. Market liberalisation, intensifying global competition, and later EMU membership and the introduction of the euro brought many problems and challenges also for labour market organi-

sations and especially the trade union movement. Yet, issues were solved bilaterally and trilaterally, and ways forward were found in cooperation. Consensus was sought and consensus delivered results. Not always easily or effortlessly, but through negotiating and agreeing. In today's political climate and state of industrial relations, this might no longer be possible.

The European Union is not only an internal market and monetary union. Its social dimension has been strengthened and gained importance, which is crucial for the EU's legitimacy. The EU enlargement in 2004 further highlighted the significance of the social dimension. In the older Member States, there were concerns about maintaining standards of working conditions and about growing social dumping.

EU Legislation Supporting Finnish Workers

Working conditions and social protection were long considered to be mainly national matters. In Finland, we assumed that the level of working conditions, the social dialogue between labour market parties, occupational safety, equality, and many other labour market issues were so advanced and firmly protected that EU legislation, regulation, nor coordination would affect them. The reality turned out quite different. European occupational safety legislation has improved Finnish workplace safety, and equality and equal pay issues have advanced through EU legislation.

As Finland's current right-wing government attacks the trade union movement and weakens workers' rights and protections, EU legislation has provided support and a safety net against the harshest cuts and assaults. International standards remain the ultimate protection for Finnish workers. Similarly,

the EU's founding treaties, which enshrine the special role of social partners and social dialogue, provide a backbone for the trade union movement in the face of attacks by right-wing politicians. The trade union movement and organised workers are not some marginal, semi-criminal civic organisation, but a vital part of a functioning democracy, of the social market economy, and of the European idea. The European Union is not only an economic, political, and social community, but very much also a community of values. We must uphold and strengthen these European values. The Finnish and European trade union movement are a strong part of this community of values and reinforce the European idea and sense of unity.

European Values Must be Protected

Without the trade union movement, without social dialogue, without a social dimension, we would not be Finnish and European in the same sense. These values, ways of working, and procedures must be cherished, especially now, as the world seems to be heading in another direction – one that forgets democracy, the rule of law, equality, human and trade union rights, and many other things once regarded as almost self-evident. The Finnish trade union movement must continue working and striving for these causes at home, in Brussels, and globally in the years and decades to come.

Jarkko Eloranta

President of the Central Organisation of
Finnish Trade Unions SAK

**"THE FINNISH AND EUROPEAN TRADE UNION MOVEMENT ARE
A STRONG PART OF THE EU'S COMMUNITY OF VALUES
AND REINFORCE THE EUROPEAN IDEA AND SENSE OF UNITY".**

30 Years of improving European Working Life

Finland has been a member of the European Union for 30 years. During these years, we have integrated into the often-complex EU bureaucracy and the Single Market. A key prerequisite for the success of this integration are fair rules for work, which are established through, among other things, common EU Labour Legislation.

It's important that trade unions actively engage in advocacy both nationally and in Brussels to influence the formation of politics and legislation. The goal is to strengthen the position of workers and to develop working life both in Finland and across Europe. FinUnions, the joint office of SAK and STTK, has an important role to play in this advocacy work.

The development of labour issues in the EU has, throughout FinUnions' 30-year history, advanced in waves, following shifts in political priorities.

Changing priorities have been the result of the EU's gradual development, responses to different types of crises, and of course shifts in the political balance of power. The Social Partners have also played a significant role in the development, particularly through bipartite and tripartite preparations, but also by influencing the progress of labour issues.

FinUnions is an important part of the broader European trade union movement. Its work has extended to issues related to the Economy, the Single Market and Trade Policy – but above all to labour matters and the development of the EU's social dimension.

When Finland joined the EU in the 1990s, it was preparing for the Economic and Monetary Union. As part of the process, the idea arose that the role of social policy might change in the euro area. As a result, the EU's social dimension began to be developed alongside economic integration. This was also a form of criticism of the Maastricht Treaty, which was considered by workers to be unbalanced, as it did not give sufficient weight to Employment and Social Policy.

Differences Between Commissions

During the Commission led by **José Manuel Barroso** (2004–2014) and during the financial crisis, tougher economic values and plans for deregulation prevailed. In this period, the social dimension was weakened, with a strong focus on building the Internal Market and strict austerity policies.

The Commission led by **Jean-Claude Juncker** (2014–2019), in turn, sought to strengthen the social dimension in response to the social consequences of the policies of its predecessor. Brexit also played its part. The Commission's aim was to promote a fairer and more balanced approach to social rights and labour issues in the EU. During Juncker's term, the European Pillar of Social Rights was created, with Member States committing to 20 shared principles covering equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion.

Under **Ursula von der Leyen's** first Commission (2019–2024), positive developments in labour issues in the EU continued. Among other things, the Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Minimum Wage Directive, the Pay Transparency Directive, and the Platform Work Directive were adopted. In addition, the Commission showed strong support for Social Dialogue both at European and national level.

EU's development requires citizens' acceptance

In the 21st century, the EU evolved from a free trade single market organisation towards a union of states where social rights and common rules for working life have been given fair recognition. One significant achievement from a workers' perspective has been the link between trade policy and labour rights. Labour and human rights have successfully been included in trade agreements, which support responsible business conduct and decent jobs.

Finnish trade union organisations have played their own important role in shaping policy throughout Finland's EU membership. We have worked together and influenced the Commission, Parliament and Member States – and will continue to do so. Advocacy is carried out in cooperation with unions in other countries, international organisations and trade union secretariats, both in Finland and in Brussels.

At present, the political winds unfortunately blow colder and more unfavorably from a workers' perspective. It seems that initiatives to strengthen workers' rights and develop working life are being overshadowed by other priorities.

We therefore have plenty of work ahead. Our common endeavor must be continued with persistence, with greater impact and a forward-looking approach, because a changing world of work also requires updated rules. Right now, legislative needs are emerging in areas such as the impact of Artificial Intelligence on working life and the management of workers' psychosocial workload.

We have tools to make a difference for workers. In early September, Commission President von der Leyen promised a new Quality Jobs Act in her State of the Union speech. Its purpose is to ensure that working life keeps pace with economic developments. This promise is the result of persistent advocacy, and influencing the content of this future legislation is one of the most important tasks for FinUnions and all European trade unions in the near future.

The European Social Partners have also recently started negotiations on a new joint work programme. The programme is intended to define how employers and workers together will develop working life in the coming years.

In other words, FinUnions and European trade unions do not lack work. We must continue to highlight how a competitive and successful economy is built on a fair society as well as on just and high-quality working life.

Faith and trust in the European Union and its success rest above all on the confidence and acceptance of its citizens.

Antti Palola
President of
the Finnish Confederation of Professionals STTK

**“TRADE UNIONS MUST CONTINUE TO HIGHLIGHT HOW A
COMPETITIVE AND SUCCESSFUL ECONOMY IS BUILT ON
A FAIR SOCIETY AS WELL AS ON JUST AND
HIGH-QUALITY WORKING LIFE”.**

Finland's Path to Europe

In May, it was 80 years since the end of the Second World War. In January, Finland has been a member of the EU for 30 years. After the war, Finland slowly rose from **Stalin's** shadow to become an equal actor in Europe. That process took 50 years.

When Finland became an EU member in January 1995, the President of the European Commission, **Jacques Delors**, gave his last speech in the European Parliament. I sat in the gallery, and the speech was unforgettable. Delors summed up his message:

“Peace and security are as important as they were in 1945–1950, after the terrible world conflict. Europe was built on 1. competition, which encourages, 2. cooperation, which strengthens, and 3. solidarity, which unites. We have welcomed three new EU Member States with long democratic traditions, capable of enriching our Social Model, which we want to defend”.

The First steps towards Europe

When the European Coal and Steel Community and the European Economic Community were created in the 1950s, Finland was far away. **Robert Schuman** delivered the historic founding words on 9 May 1950. Finland's Embassy in Paris reported on this only three months later.

When Robert Schuman visited Finland in spring 1953 at the invitation of the Foreign Trade Association, **Urho Kekkonen's** government decided in advance that no hospitality or atten-

tion should be given to Schuman.

However, President **Juho Kusti Paasikivi** did receive the distinguished guest and held a discussion with him. This is recorded in Paasikivi's diaries.

On the foundation of the Coal and Steel Community, the European Economic Community was created in 1957. It became a major promoter of free trade among its member states. Those left outside had to react. Under British leadership, the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) was formed, including other Nordic countries.

Finland's problem was the Soviet Union's negative viewpoint on EFTA membership. Eventually, a guarantee was given that Finland would not join EFTA but instead pursue a separate Finnish solution. That is what happened. Soviet leader **Nikita Khrushchev** came to Helsinki for Urho Kekkonen's 60th birthday dinner, where the matter was confirmed.

Major steps during the 1980s and 1990s

Europe's great upheavals began in the 1980s. In 1986, Finland became a full member of EFTA. In 1989, Finland joined the Council of Europe as a full member. That same year, the Berlin Wall fell, and Germany was reunified.

From the summer of 1990, I was Finland's Ambassador to the EU. As a newcomer, I could ask the so-called stupid questions of the wise:

1. What was the core of the EU? The answer was: the use of force is replaced by the Rule of Law. The Rule of Law guarantees democracy, as well as citizens' rights and freedoms.
2. How is this achieved? The answer: decision-making must be non-hegemonic but effective. That is why qualified

majorities are needed; a single veto blocks change.

Austria had applied for EU membership in 1989. This was known, but Sweden's decision to apply in July 1991 came as a surprise to Finland and made people angry.

In August that summer, an attempted coup d'état in Moscow failed. In December 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed.

In Finland, Turku professor **Esko Antola** had spoken in favour of EU membership. Among political leaders, the first were **Paavo Lipponen** and **Ilkka Suominen**. The EU train was moving, but the Finnish Government lacked a clear position, leaving a question mark over Finland.

Fortunately, other actors were on the move. Most important among them were the Workers' and Industry Organizations in Brussels. The Confederation of Finnish Industries had already opened an office there in 1974. The trade unions followed later, but even before that, many union delegations visited Brussels, eager to learn about the European Union.

The Social Partners also cooperated well. **Kari Jalas** was often present, and many trade union leaders became familiar, such as former FinUnions leaders **Pekka O. Aro**, **Pekka Ahmavaara** and **Heikki Pohja**. The management level of the unions strongly supported this work.

Time for a decision

Jacques Delors was a legendary President of the European Commission, and social dialogue was of great importance to him. He first visited Finland as Commission President in 1988 and met with the labor market organizations.

At the Maastricht summit in December 1991, the Dutch EU Presidency proposed starting accession negotiations with Austria and Sweden. This was a shock for Finland. Had Finland missed the train?

Soon after, Finland's EU delegation in Brussels reported that if Finland wanted to negotiate EU membership at the same time as Austria and Sweden, the application had to be submitted in February 1992, or by early March at the latest. The next round might not come for another ten years.

President **Mauno Koivisto** spoke in favour of EU membership at the opening of Parliament in 1992. **Esko Aho's** Government decided to apply for EU membership. Accession negotiations began in February 1993, and their political part was concluded on 1 March 1994, the same day **Martti Ahtisaari** assumed the presidency.

Jacques Delors visited Finland again after the membership negotiations ended in July 1994. He went directly to Pori, where he specifically wanted to meet the labor market organizations. A joint seminar was organized in Pori, which received wide attention.

A referendum was held on EU membership, in which "Yes" received 57 % and "No" 42 %. The social partners actively participated in the membership campaign. This also had a lasting effect: EU membership did not become a deeply divisive issue in Finland.

The next EU enlargement round did not take place until more than nine years later. Finland timed its decision to join the EU correctly.

Erkki Liikanen, Finland's Ambassador to the EU
1990–1994 and EU Commissioner 1995–2004



THE TEXTS IN THIS PUBLICATION ARE PART OF A BLOG SERIES
CELEBRATING BOTH FINLAND'S AND FINUNIONS' 30-YEAR JOURNEY
IN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND IN BRUSSELS. IN THE BLOG ENTRIES,
FORMER DIRECTORS OF FINUNIONS AND THE OFFICE'S STAKEHOLDERS
SHARE THEIR EXPERIENCES OF WORKING IN BRUSSELS
AND COOPERATING ON AN EU-LEVEL.