



Executive Committee – Zagreb 2024

Looking Back at the History of SCECBU Frans Vanderschelde, Honorary President

Dear colleagues,

I'm very pleased to be here with you today to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Standing Committee. Sixty years is a long time, and much has happened during this period. We've witnessed major changes in the National Central Banks and the impact of the enlargement of the European Union, which has led to more and more national central banks' trade unions becoming members of our committee. And, of course, the creation of the European Central Bank.

At the beginning of the year, Elizabeth Barreiros interviewed me in detail about what had happened during this period and how I had personally experienced it.

My first encounter with the Standing Committee was in 1975, 11 years after its creation. However, I must admit there was a seven-year hiatus after 1968.

Before that date, I knew nothing about the Committee's existence.

When I received the invitation from the Banque de France to attend the meeting in Rome my friend Hujuel told me: "This is a committee that last met in Frankfurt in 1968.

But the French left in a hurry because of the student revolts and strikes that broke out in France

and many other places in Europe." That piqued my

curiosity. I discovered that at that time, the committee had no name, no organizational structure, and no president.

It started by coincidence, thanks to the 3 founding fathers: the Italian Andreini member of the resistance against Mussolini, the Frenchman Maurice Gouseau also member of the resistance and the German Social Democrat, Wolfgang Clotten, soldier at the Russian front and prisoner of war during several years in the USSR.

All three were convinced that another war had to be avoided and that cooperation was indispensable.

Surprising as it may seem, this idea has given rise to the most representative international trade union body in the National Central Banks and the European Central Bank.

The student protests in 1968 were undoubtedly a trigger for social upheaval, but not the sole reason for what transpired in society and central banks afterward. Of course, the students criticized the existing political establishment, and for them, the established trade union confederations and federations were part of it.

The post-World War II generation produced an unprecedented number of young people who were increasingly disillusioned and dissatisfied with the society built by their parents, despite having no material worries in most cases.

After the upheaval, political and social organizations across Europe, including the trade unions in the central banks, refocused on their problems. Personally, I believe this was the main reason for the shifts we saw. Even Maurice Gousseau and Wolfgang Clötten, couldn't give me a comprehensive answer.

Maurice simply told me that "it was a difficult time" when it wasn't easy to convince colleagues from other central banks to continue with the Standing Committee. His only option was to take up his "pilgrim's staff" and embark on a new European tour, and so he did.

The 1975 Rome Conference marked a new beginning. While the events of 1968 were long behind us, their repercussions lingered. This didn't mean the trade unions hadn't learned their lessons; they realized that fundamental changes were necessary and that they needed to involve their members more.

A major difference from today is that, back then, people believed in what I would call collective action.

In today's world, people are more inclined to seek individual solutions. As trade unions in national central banks, we recognized that there were two predominant models: the Anglo-Saxon model and the Bundesbank model. Our concern was that the Anglo-Saxon model might prevail, which could have significant consequences for employment and the future of the staff. Consequently, in addition to traditional demands on pay and benefits, trade unions began focusing more on the activities of central banks and the impact of computerisation, which was still in its infancy at the time.

When examining social evolution from a historical perspective, it's essential to consider both the overt and underlying currents. On the surface, the issues discussed between employers and employees haven't changed much—wage demands, employment, and additional social benefits. However, if we delve deeper, we see that some things have fundamentally changed. In the past consultation used to mean reaching a consensus and signing collective agreements.

Now, it often involves merely listening to unions, perhaps considering one or two suggestions, but not genuinely negotiating on many issues that affect the future of the workforce.

The turning point came when the employer side stopped discussing staff policy and started talking about human resources (HR). From my perspective, this was a mistake from the start, because a human being is not and should never become a mere

resource.

Most HR approaches involve direct contact between employee and employer, with the trade union organisation playing only an advisory role—this is precisely what the ECB is attempting to implement.

When I was elected President of the Standing Committee at the Frankfurt Congress in 1982, the world, especially the trade union world, was vastly different.

It was much more divided, and just a few years earlier, three countries—Greece, Portugal, and Spain—were ruled by dictators. In these countries, trade unions had to be built from scratch. Spain and Greece had experienced bloody civil wars, and Portugal had undergone bloody decolonization wars.

The European Trade Union Confederation did not yet exist. Internationally, trade unions were divided into socialist, communist, Christian, conservative or corporate unions. As President, I had to quickly gain the trust of all these national and international unions. It wasn't easy, and it remains challenging for my successor, Thierry. I always began with a simple observation: if someone disagreed with me on an issue, we knew both, the question was to know why he disagreed?

The answer usually lay in the historical facts and the different legal bases under which trade unions had to develop their activities, as well as the power balance in the respective countries.

I had to gain the trust not only of the trade unions but also of the governors and presidents of the central banks. Earning the trust of both unions and employers requires maintaining credibility, which is the most important lesson I have learned and experienced.

In my view, the most significant event was our ability to intervene in the preparation of the ECB.

Reflecting on this, I recall the central bank presidents and governors I met, who played crucial roles at the time and often afterward.

My most important meeting was with Jacques Delors, who passed away some months ago. It was under his leadership that the "bible" of the European Economic and Monetary Union, the Delors Report, was written.

As a committee, we closely followed the preparation of this report, thanks in part to the excellent information provided by our then Vice-President, Georges Kaskarelis of the Bank of Greece.

I had several important discussions leading up to the establishment of the ECB with notable figures such as my own Governor, Fons Verplaetse, the President of the Nederlandsche Bank, Duisenberg, the President of the Bundesbank, Karel Otto Phöl, and the Governor of the Banque de France, de La Rosière.

Thanks to them, I came into contact with the first President of the European Monetary Institute, Lamfalussy. His initial challenge was finding a location for the EMI's offices. Symbolically, he found a place in the building of the "Bank für Gemeinwirtschaft," the large and powerful bank of the German trade union movement, which had been forced

to sell its premises to European commercial banks. A symbol of the ongoing struggle between corporate and capitalist societies.

Regarding national unions, I had the most contact with the unions within the central banks. To become a member of the committee, the organization had to be recognized as representative of the staff of national central bank staff under the national regulations. Additionally, the trade union should uphold human rights as set out in the United Nations Charter or the European Declaration of Human Rights.

As President, it became customary for me to be invited, alone or with Bureau members, to the congresses and training sessions of the trade unions in the national banks.

At the European level, the relationship and cooperation with FIET, to which many of our members also belonged, experienced ups and downs.

The International Federation of Clerical, Technical and Managerial Employees (FIET) was an international trade union organisation founded in 1904 and officially launched under this name in 1921.

An international office was set up in Amsterdam in 1904, and an international secretariat for commercial workers was established in Hamburg in 1910, which was disbanded at the outbreak of the First World War.

The Congress of the FIET was held in Vienna from 10 to 12 August 1921. Initially the organisation was mainly European, but after the Second World War it expanded worldwide.

In 1994, FIET had approximately 11 million members. On 1 January 2000, the organisation became the world trade union UNI.

My personal stance was to never allow a complete break, especially during the 80s and 90s when tensions were high. This made it very challenging for the Standing Committee to be recognised as the representative body of the staff of European national central banks.

Indeed, FIET claimed an exclusive right to represent the staff of the European central banks, including the future staff of the yet-to-be-established European Central Bank. It was only after the official establishment of the ESCB that a modus vivendi was found and an agreement on social consultation with the ECB was reached.

Another issue was the recognition of trade union rights for ECB staff. The Statute of the ECB provides for the establishment of a Staff Committee but is silent on trade union and collective bargaining rights. The powers of this committee are minimal, as underlined by the Court of Justice of the European Union.

The German trade unions initially claimed that social legislation applied in the ECB 1000 because the ECB was located on German territory. They apparently lost sight of the fact that the Federal Republic of Germany had concluded a so-called headquarters agreement in 1998.

“Abkommen zwischen der Regierung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und der Europäischen Zentralbank über den Sitz der Europäischen Zentralbank EZBAbk Ausfertigungsdatum: 18.09.1998 Vollzitat: "Abkommen zwischen der Regierung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und der Europäischen Zentralbank über den Sitz der Europäischen Zentralbank vom 18. September 1998 (BGBl. 1998 II S. 2996)" Fußnote G v. 19.12.1998 II 2995 In Kraft gem. Bek. v. 18.3.1999 II 367 mWv 4.3.1999“.

This agreement expressly provides that German social legislation does not apply to the ECB.

Article 15 Non-applicability of German labour and social welfare law. Pursuant to Article 36 of the ESCB Statute, the conditions of employment of the members of the Executive Board and the employees of the ECB shall not be subject to either the substantive or the procedural labour and social welfare law of the Federal Republic of Germany.

Afterwards, on the initiative of a German public servant's trade union, a staff union was imposed on the ECB, but its powers are also not legally defined.

On the workers' side, we initially tried to secure at least the same rights as those in the European Works Council legislation. We basically succeeded and I have noticed that the original agreement has been improved several times, which is positive.

A more dangerous trend is the erosion of the fundamental rights of workers' representatives.

This is something I reflect on, especially now that 24 years have passed. I often ask myself what we achieved during my presidency. Certainly, we have not been able to accomplish everything we had hoped for.

However, in a time of rapid change and shifting power dynamics, we managed to maintain and even strengthen the Committee's influence.

But let's not forget, industrial action organised by committed trade unionists must be supported by the workers they represent. It always has been and always will be the case.

Elizabeth asked me: how can we remain pioneers. My answer is simply by continuing to lead. However, this requires a lot of knowledge and insight—understanding what is happening and grasping what people's true expectations and aspirations are.

You may face more challenges than we did, living in a time of increasing individualism and crumbling solidarity. Yet, revolutions have always come when least expected.

That's why it's crucial for trade unions to stay attuned to the people you represent. Eventually, even the current generation will recognize the need for cooperation and solidarity.

Like in the past, this journey will involve trial and error, but it is not an impossible one. I wish you the best in this endeavour!