

# So what is Europe for?

Anita Pollack says Europe is about consumer and environmental protection or nothing in a response to Martin Cook's scepticism

**W**e could just say "it's peace and prosperity, stupid", and leave it at that. However Martin Cook's piece in *Chartist* July/August issue begs a considered response about the EU if the resurgence of Euro-scepticism on the left (as well as the right) is to be countered.

Many democratic socialists would contend that the EU is something we need to work on, engage with and improve, but dispute his assertion that the argument is between so-called Blairite economic reformers (Gordon Brown advancing the notion that Europe should follow his economic lead) and hard right rejectionists. If we don't like the PFI style economics coming out of Downing Street maybe we ought to argue withdrawal from the EU? The EU is part of our life and it's up to the Left to try and make it work better. Let's not forget the good stuff. (Isn't that just the same argument we use to support a continued Labour government?) The EU is certainly not the panacea to all problems at home, but withdrawal would solve nothing.

Trades unions recognise the damage that withdrawal from the EU would do to jobs in this country. And what good would it do? To see our goods in Europe we would still have to meet EU directives and we would lose our say in developing them.

Martin Cook suggests that there does not seem to be much noise in the press from other EU countries about the European Social Model, and this line of approach is now dead and buried. Since when was the press faithfully replicating the debate about anything? Arguments for the social market economy and social justice remain alive and flourish-

ing all over the continent. It's not valid to enlarge Swedish small countryitis into a continent-wide malaise. Martin points to the heavy handed approach of the European Central Bank (ECB) as evidence, but there are widespread voices calling for reform of the Growth and Stability Pact. There should be no reason why economic expansion and investment in social equity cannot take place, so long as it does not lead to inflation (which has never been the friend of the working class). If Britain were part of the Euro-zone I suggest this country would be arguing for this reform too. It's not in the interests of the ECB nor anyone else to institutionalise recession. There is not the slightest reason

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why the poor new EU countries should remain poor indefinitely (look at Ireland's progress) and indeed such a scenario is in no-one's interest.

We should be careful, too, about suggesting that all ECB policy is about blocking any transfer of wealth from richer to poorer. European regional and cohesion policy has just this at its basis, but taxation does remain national policy and it's up to the Left here to join the potent argument on the continent that higher taxation of the wealthier sections of society could offer more scope for investment in public services.

It's true that gone are the heady days of Jacques Delors' speech to the TUC during the Thatcher era which turned the

tide on the traditional anti-Europeanism of the Left. Given the recent enlargement to the poor countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the old left idea of Europe as a rich man's club is no longer the case. In the 80s, the social goods of women's equality legislation, health and safety rules and environment laws tipped the balance of public opinion. It seemed that good things for working people came from Europe rather than the repressive government at home, and that the Tories were forced to make some progressive legislative changes as a result.

After the Labour victory in 1997, the European Social Chapter was taken on board by the UK. Let's remember this would never have happened under the Tories. It's true, though, that the Left does have to continue to argue hard for and defend workers' rights in the teeth of constant pressure on our government from anti-regulation minded business.

Martin is right to complain about some of the attempts to push the pure market economy and the privatisation agenda. Yet despite some set-backs, we are still seeing advances in consumer protection, public health priorities, environmental standards, working conditions such as working time and rights for part-time and temporary workers, and better discrimination laws coming from the EU, in the teeth of an in-built right-wing majority in the European Parliament since 1999. Some of this has been despite opposition from our own business friendly new Labour government. But if you look at publications such as the RSPB's magazine you will see praise for 'boring' EU policies such as the Water Framework Directive, and to com-



Neil Kinnock with a European person - he likes Europe even if nobody else does

mitment to preserving biodiversity, amongst others. Yes there are threats to the environment in Eastern Europe (mostly from policies of their own governments), so pressure needs to be kept on the European Commission to ensure that funding departments do not violate EU environmental rules, rather than simply turning our backs and complaining.

Another stage in CAP reform is now on the books, largely thanks to pressure from the Left. Still not enough to be sure, but food mountains are now largely a memory, and the new agri-environment measures are about protecting the land, not destroying it. The outrageously high subsidies to the tobacco farmers, against which I fought for years, are now being abolished. Strategic environmental impact assessment (now law) will make it more difficult for thoughtless EU regional funding to be used for motorway building that damages the environment, and with a bit of luck, our own government's mad plans to expand airport runways everywhere in the South East. We are also seeing the beginnings of progress in WTO negotiations that will force reductions in damaging EU subsidies and help developing countries market their produce to the EU. Even lots more of the EU's secret deals and documents now must be disclosed to the public eye, thanks to a Labour MEP. More to do here, but there is progress.

Some may hold up cheap air travel as an EU success story, but as an environmentalist I see it as highly damaging.

Martin Cook's piece brought incidentally an attack on a per-

fectly harmless EU attempt to improve the standards of vitamins and herbal pills, and even Peter Hain has accused Brussels of meddling in this area. It's a myth. Precisely one of the important things Europe IS for is to protect consumers. The Directive on food supplements is about ensuring that products on the market not only are safe, but that they do what it says on the tin. No vitamin or herbal product will be banned outright. Some research showed that some Echinacea products on the market contain such small amounts of the essential active ingredient in a daily dose that they could not make a jot of difference to anyone's health. That's marketing fraud. The petition campaign circulating in health food shops is sponsored by Consumers for Health Choice, a lobby funded by big producers, many of them US-owned. They are using scare tactics and outright lies. This is not meddling from Brussels, but a perfectly legitimate attempt to protect consumers.

One of the big battles - the challenge to the destructive power of big chemical companies - is taking place right now via the European Commission's REACH proposals. Forty years after the American scientist Rachel Carson wrote *The Silent Spring*, we are on the brink of having important health tests made on the safety of the cocktail of chemicals we all ingest daily. This will be a first step to reduce the carcinogenic risks of the world we live in. I speak painfully as one who has had four friends die this year from cancer. This important reform is being fiercely fought by

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right wing interests. So where is the Left's campaign? Not in evidence.

So indifferent are we that we have left all the running on this to the Greens, and managed to send a depleted band of Labour MEPs back to Brussels so that the team will be hard put even to stand up against pressure to water down the REACH proposals. It's all being left to campaigning by NGOs such as WWF, with Green noise off.

The anti-globalisation and anti-war campaigns seem to have spilled over in the minds of left leaning political animals into being anti all parts of the establishment and with it the EU, resulting in a rise of opposition to a joining the Euro and ratifying the European Convention. I, too, did not support the war in Iraq, but does it really mean we have to take on board the whole truckload of ancillary bitterness?

Don't let's forget peace as a fairly decent reason for the EU to exist. A Europe divided since the Cold War has now been reunited. Policies will be decided by voting not by armies. Don't underestimate the power of negotiation round the political table.

The job of the left should not be to support UKIP in trying to sink the EU but to continue to democratise it and argue for democratic socialism with our partners from the continent. Accountability is important as is improved scrutiny of Brussels, which is part of the European Constitution proposals. That actually gives more power to national Parliaments to look at emerging legislation and decide whether it is suitable for the European stage.

A more positive attitude to working for a better Europe would be helpful rather than criticising from the edges, letting it by default fall into the hands of the ultra-right. We have just seen an unhappy combination of Euroscepticism and populism leading to 12 UKIP nutters being elected to the European Parliament. This did mainly hit the Tory vote to be sure, but Labour's team was also decimated by the 'principled' abstentions and anti-war support for Respect. This sort of protest vote lasts for a full five year term, not just a week's press headlines. Our reduced band of Labour MEPs needs a bit of solidarity from party members in their effort to improve our quality of life in the next five years.