

National tensions sink agreement on European Union constitution

Chris Marsden
17 December 2003

The failure of European Union leaders to reach agreement on a constitution at the December 13 Brussels summit threatens a political fracturing of Europe.

The adoption of a constitution was meant to mark the consolidation of the EU as a coherent economic and political force, prior to its expansion from 15 to 25 members in May. But instead, talks broke down over proposed changes to the voting rights assigned to the respective countries.

France and Germany refused to shift on their demand for a new “double majority” voting system that would give greater clout to countries with larger populations. Poland and Spain insisted on maintaining the present system that gives each country an almost equal weight.

Under a treaty agreed in Nice in 2000 that will operate until 2009, Poland and Spain get 27 votes each in a system of weighted or qualified majority voting within an enlarged EU. Germany, France, Britain and Italy have 29. Germany argued that despite its 80 million population it could be easily outvoted by the 54 votes of Poland and Spain, whose combined population is also 80 million.

Italy’s Silvio Berlusconi, in his role as rotating EU President, presented four alternative proposals in an attempt to break the deadlock, but to no avail.

The argument about populations and voting weights is not the real reason for the antagonisms that led to the talks breaking down. Germany and France are using the issue in order to demand the adoption of constitutional arrangements that would secure and maintain their own hegemony within an expanded EU, as reflects their economic muscle.

They were also anxious that the host of new entrants would not lead to political paralysis within the EU when it came to such issues as the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, the laying down of budget restrictions and the pursuit of a common foreign and military policy. To this end, the proposed constitution, drafted by a convention of 105 delegates headed by former French president Valéry Giscard D’Estaing, proposes a “double majority” system under which a vote is passed when it has the support of 50 percent of countries, representing 60 percent of the EU’s population.

Britain’s Prime Minister Tony Blair took a far more equivocal stance. When he briefed MPs on the draft constitution in June, he gave conditional support to qualified majority voting (QMV), explaining, “If we want to drive through economic reform, liberalise markets, break down state subsidies, then in a Europe of 25 QMV on issues like trade in services and mutual recognition of qualifications is essential for the British national interest.”

But Blair also made clear that he is determined to prevent the

consolidation of German-French hegemony within the EU and sees the entry of the East European states such as Poland as giving him allies in pursuing this agenda. He told parliament, “These new nations joining the EU share, in many ways, the British perspective. They are firmly in favour of the Transatlantic Alliance... It is no surprise therefore that the Convention so explicitly ruled out a European Federal Superstate.”

Consequently, Blair played a double-game at Brussels, not allying himself with Poland and Spain openly but insisting that their views should be respected. He and Foreign Secretary Jack Straw either called for a decision to be postponed until 2009 or said that no decision was better than a wrong one.

Plans to adopt the proposed constitution ran aground due to the conflicting national interests of the European powers that the document was meant to wield into a coherent economic and political force. There are longstanding reasons for the eruption of such national antagonisms within Europe. Since its inception the EU has been led by Germany as the continent’s undisputed economic powerhouse, with France as its key political ally. Berlin pays fully one quarter of the EU’s total budget, for example.

Fears of German domination of the EU have always existed amongst Europe’s lesser states such as Poland. This same fear has shaped the British bourgeoisie’s attitude to the EU project. Since its entry into the Common Market in the 1970s, London’s policy, resting on an alliance with Washington, has been characterised by internal opposition to the “Franco-German axis”. But what has helped bring things to a head is the aggressive assertion of the global interests of US imperialism by the Bush administration and Washington’s developing hostility to the project of European unification that it hitherto supported.

The 250-page, 465-article draft EU constitution, which had already been subject to 70 pages of amendments, contains its fair share of hyperbole about democratic and human rights. But its agenda is dictated by the strivings of the major European powers to project themselves as an economic, political and military rival to Washington. As such, its provisions are hostile to the social and political interests of the European working class, which is paying for the European states attempts to realise their own predatory global ambitions with the destruction of its living standards and an escalation of militarism.

The draft constitution sets out to coordinate the politics of “member states” and define their relations. Nominal proposals on the rights of citizens come only after an extended presentation of the rights of states including respecting “essential State functions”—i.e., the apparatus of military and police repression defined as the means for “ensuring the territorial integrity of the State, and for maintaining law

and order and safeguarding internal security.”

Internally, the constitution sets out to consolidate the EU as a free-trade zone where the interests of the major corporations dictate all aspects of economic and social policy. Its statement of objectives even links the concepts of “freedom, security and justice” with a pledge to defend “a single market where competition is free and undistorted”. Article Four lists amongst its “Fundamental freedoms” the free movement of “goods, services and capital”.

The draft advocates giving the EU “exclusive competence” over monetary policy in the euro zone and the role of coordinating economic, employment and social policies. This would be a recipe for major attacks on welfare provisions in order to pay for tax breaks and other incentives to business.

Internationally the draft constitution sets out to grant the EU powers covering “all areas of foreign policy and all questions relating to the Union’s security, including the progressive framing of a common defence policy, which might lead to a common defence.”

Despite the attempts to placate the opposition of Blair and that of Washington itself, this is a clear attempt to establish Europe as a military force independent of the US and NATO, replete with its own command structure and foreign minister.

The Bush administration cannot tolerate such a direct challenge to its global hegemony and has worked to curtail the ambitions of Germany and France.

Prior to the summit meeting, the Bush administration made a provocative announcement that the Pentagon would bar any nation that failed to support the illegal US war in Iraq from bidding on \$18.6 billion in reconstruction contracts. President Bush himself stepped forward to defend the measure, which explicitly blacklists contractors from France and Germany. Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz went further, saying the measure was necessary in order to protect “essential security interests of the United States”, thereby implying that German or French contractors were the representatives of hostile powers.

Bush was sending a signal to his allies in Europe such as Britain and Poland that they could not run with the hare and hunt with the hounds—that loyalty to Washington would be rewarded while attempts to form too close an alliance of European powers would be punished.

The message was not lost on the EU leaders and the contracts issue even threatened to dominate discussions prior to the summit’s collapse on December 13—a day before it was due to end. Blair made his stand clear when he insisted that it was “for the Americans to decide how to spend their own money.”

Even the much-touted gains made by the EU—the European defence agreement ratified on December 11 between Britain, France and Germany and the adoption of an EU “security strategy” that includes a new mutual defence clause—suffered as a direct result of the aggressive political intervention of the US.

The deal only allows for the creation of a “planning cell” at the EU’s Brussels military headquarters, falling far short of the independent command structure sought by Paris and Berlin. The cell will be used as a last resort, and the EU will always in the first instance consider using NATO facilities. As a further concession to Washington, the EU was also forced to agree that NATO can have a permanent liaison office at EU military headquarters in Brussels. In return, the EU will establish a permanent presence at NATO’s military planning headquarters at Mons in Belgium.

Earlier and far more ambitious plans to create a 25,000-strong rapid reaction force are no longer even discussed. Instead, on the very day

that Britain signed the agreement with France and Germany, Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon announced plans for the creation of a high-tech British rapid reaction “expeditionary force” that can participate alongside the US in the so-called “war on terror”. The type of technology cited by Hoon can only be supplied by the US.

Germany and France have responded to the thwarting of their ambitions by proposing an alternative strategy. Even prior to the summit, the two powers had discussed the formation of a “hard core” or “pioneer group” of countries that are willing to push ahead with European integration. After the summit, Germany’s Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder said a definitive failure to agree on a constitution could indeed lead to a “two-speed Europe”, while France’s President Jacques Chirac called the plan “a motor that would set an example.... It will allow Europe to go faster, better.”

It is not possible to predict whether such a project will be carried through, or whether compromises and threats will prevent such a formal split. Nevertheless the fault-lines that were revealed at Brussels will not go away. To some degree they reflect the division between what US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld defined in January as “old” and “new” Europe. “New” Europe should not be understood as a catch-all term for the East European states, but as politically defining the countries closest to Washington including Britain, Spain and Poland.

Germany will no doubt make use of its economic power in an effort to isolate Poland from other members of the “Visegrad group” such as Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which have indicated their desire to join any fast-track group that is established. And Blair certainly does not want his alliance with Washington to lead to a breakdown of relations with Germany and France. Immediately following the summit, for example, Britain signed a letter to Prodi along with Austria, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden calling for average expenditure during the next EU budget period to be kept at current levels—a move that would hit new entrants from the East hard.

All manner of such alliances will be formed to push through economic measures and foreign policy initiatives designed to ensure that the European powers secure their share in a military redivision of the world’s resources and markets. But a blow was delivered against the strategic aims of German and French imperialism. *Le Monde* described it as “a second defeat in less than a year” for an “isolated” couple following their failure to prevent war against Iraq, while *Libération* complained of the inability of the “Franco-German motor” to take any initiative within the EU. As such it presages an intensification of inter-imperialist antagonisms both within Europe and between Europe and America.



To contact the WWSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact