

Divisions predominate despite agreement on European constitution

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The adoption of a constitution for the European Union is meant to herald a new stage in the efforts of the major European powers to unify the continent, both economically and politically. Instead, a two-day summit of 25 heads of state in Brussels last week could only produce a compromise that serves to demonstrate how acute divisions between the European powers have become and how Europe's governments and the EU project itself lack any popular support or democratic legitimacy.

There was massive pressure on all of Europe's rulers to ensure that a constitution was agreed. Negotiations had broken down in acrimony last December, while this month's European elections produced major reversals for nearly all the continents ruling parties, widespread abstentions and significant votes for right-wing parties opposed to the EU, such as the UK Independence Party in Britain.

The *Financial Times* had warned that a failure to agree to a constitution for a second time would expose the EU as a "busted flush" to the rest of the world.

As a result Germany and France went out of their way to appease the objections of Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair and those of the EU's smaller nations—particularly the 10 accession countries mainly from Eastern Europe who joined in May 1.

Blair had significantly hardened his stance in the face not only of the anti-EU UKIP vote, but of a campaign more dangerous to him led by sections of the British bourgeoisie hostile to any further integration into the EU, who are, in turn, backed by powerful voices within the United States.

Blair was placed on notice that he must oppose all measures that would lead to a consolidation of German and French hegemony over the continent. His task was to secure the ability of Britain to lead a coalition of the accession countries as a bulwark of pro-US states, one dedicated to preventing the EU challenging Washington's political and military hegemony.

For this reason, negotiations were seriously acrimonious, despite a shared interest in ensuring a successful outcome.

Blair, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and Chancellor Gordon Brown were making bellicose statements even before the Brussels summit. They promised to preserve their "red lines" on ensuring an independent British foreign policy and a veto on any measures that undermine a US-led NATO, that the EU would not be able to set a common tax policy and that it would not be able to impose legislation undermining the anti-union laws drafted by the previous Conservative government by upholding a right to strike.

Confederation of British Industry director-general Digby Jones had warned, "It is vital that the UK government remains in control of business policy." And Blair had indicated a readiness to veto the constitution unless the other 24 member states explicitly agree that the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which forms part of the EU constitution, did not override the policy of nation states. This was despite the fact that the charter's preamble already makes clear that its proposals are essentially

decorative and do not override national law and reassurance from the Foreign Office that Blair would secure an easy victory because none of his "red lines" are in reality directly challenged by the constitutional treaty.

Blair's grandstanding in order to appease his supporters in the City also focused on opposing France and Germany's proposal for replacing Romano Prodi as president of the new European Commission in October, with Guy Verhofstadt.

The Belgian prime minister had angered the UK, the Bush administration in the US and its other European allies, such as Italy and Poland, by organising a mini-summit on European defence last year together with other opponents of the Iraq war such as Germany and France.

French President Jacques Chirac could not contain his annoyance, accusing the UK of making too many demands for special treatment. He told reporters on day one of the summit that the EU had to "avoid being blocked by a single country" and that Britain wanted to water down the constitution. Ambitions for the constitution had been "reduced especially on tax and social security," he said, by the UK's position.

He opposed a proposal for the British Conservative EU commissioner Chris Patten to be the new president of the EU commission, as it was not a good idea to have a candidate from "a country which doesn't take part in all European policies". Chirac insisted that the commission president must speak French and come from a member state that is in the eurozone and the Schengen passport-free area. This rules out not just Patten, who has now withdrawn, but the vast majority of potential candidates, including any from the Eastern Europe states.

The Blair government retaliated by calling Chirac's tactics "unfortunate" and complaining against the decision of German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder to link the issues of the constitution and the presidency. Asserting the growing influence of Britain—and by extension the US—in Europe, thanks to the accession of the formerly Stalinist Eastern Europe states, Blair's official spokesman declared, "We are operating in a Europe of 25, not of two or six or one."

In the end, a constitution was adopted at the eleventh hour, which largely acceded to the demands of Britain, as well as those of the accession countries and other smaller states on voting rights.

The European parliament doubles its powers of legislative co-decision and gains a say over farm aid, fisheries and the union's overall £75 billion annual budget. The constitution also allows for majority voting in 30 new areas, including asylum and immigration, energy and aspects of criminal procedural law.

But Britain retains its national vetoes on defence and foreign policy or obtains "emergency brake" procedures that are tantamount to a veto on issues it may disagree with such as social security and common policing. Crucially there is no majority voting on tax. On foreign policy, initial strategy decisions must be taken by all 25 states, but majority voting will suffice on the ground implementation.

It was on the issue of voting strength that negotiations over the

constitution broke down last December, when Spain and Poland objected to proposals that a majority vote would need the support of just 50 percent of members, and these countries should represent at least 60 percent of the EU's population. This gave a determining position to the larger countries—Germany, France and also Britain. In a compromise decision the proportions were increased to 55 percent and 65 percent respectively—at least 15 EU states—thus aiding the smaller nations to block legislation they oppose.

A compromise on the post of commission president proved to be a bridge too far and ministers will now reconvene to choose a new candidate in around three weeks' time. Chirac is now promoting his Foreign Minister Michel Barnier, against the Portuguese Prime Minister Jose Manuel Durao Baroso—another leading ally of Bush during the Iraq war. Britain is refusing to say whom it backs for the post, because of the hostility this would generate towards such a candidate from France and Germany.

Britain was clearly pleased at its ability to sabotage the more ambitious plans of Berlin and Paris. Blair told reporters: "This is important because a new Europe is taking shape in which Britain can build alliances and feel at home; a Europe in which there is no one dominant view; a Europe in which there is flexible and diverse progress.

"No one who looks seriously at this treaty can say it is a ramp for a federal superstate. It is a new Europe. You can feel the difference with these new countries round the table," he added. "There was a battle about the type of future Europe we were going to have. There were people who wanted to harmonise taxes or give away the veto on foreign policy and defence. That is not what has happened... Instead we have found common cause and common allies in ensuring Europe remains a Europe of nation states."

These conclusions were echoed in the *Daily Mirror*, which boasted: "Old Europe rolled over yesterday. In a major shift of power, France and Germany, the founder members of the original six-strong European club, no longer call the shots... In private, British officials said it was the end of an era of 'bullying and intimidation' by France."

Blair's ability to impose his demands on Germany and France indicates one of the major difficulties facing the European powers. Germany and France were able to consolidate their control over Europe for most of the post-war era, but only because the project of European unification had the support of Washington, which saw it as an essential mechanism for combating and containing the Soviet Union during the Cold War era.

The downfall of the Soviet Union has signalled a major shift in the policy of US imperialism, which under the Bush administration is seeking to assert America's unchallenged global hegemony by reason of its present military superiority. As a result, the US has abandoned its former policy towards Europe in favour of asserting itself as a European power—primarily by supporting Britain, the eastern states such as Poland, and to some degree Italy and Portugal—in an effort to curb German and French influence.

It is Washington's tacit support and his alliance with the eastern states that has enabled Blair to dictate terms on the constitution to a great extent. But his reliance on the US bourgeoisie is also a major source of his own political difficulties.

Blair has done everything in his power to ensure the support of the anti-European sections of the ruling class, represented by those such as Rupert Murdoch, on whom his government relies for support. But what he has fed them has only whetted their appetite for more.

Murdoch's *Sun* newspaper has stated its opposition to the demand of the UKIP to leave the EU, but has still been vitriolic in its opposition to Blair signing the constitution, accusing him of having "betrayed Britain".

It editorialized: "If Tony Blair thinks he will be welcomed home from Brussels in triumph, he can forget it. However much he may have put up a fight with the French, he has still agreed a deal which has made this

country a partner to a European constitution."

The *Sun* went on to agree with Blair: "There are positives to draw from this summit, however unhappy we are with the outcome. There is a clear rift between New Europe and Old Europe. The emerging former Communist countries, led by Poland, do not want to have their new-found flexible economies strangled by being forced into the straitjackets so loved by France and Germany. That bodes well for the EU's future."

These statements indicate the depth of the divisions that have opened up within Europe, which in turn have their source in the drive by the US to subordinate the world to its dictates. As a result, the expansion and unification of Europe supposedly heralded by the adoption of a common constitution presages instead only growing dissension and conflict.

More fundamental still is the lack of any political support and legitimacy for the EU project amongst Europe's peoples. Europe's governments all lack any mass social base. And above all most workers no longer distinguish between the social democrats, whether led by Blair or Schröder, and the traditional parties of the right. All are seen as the political representatives of big business, bent on destroying vital welfare provisions and ensuring maximum exploitation of the working class on behalf of the major corporations.

This political hostility to the ruling elites takes on a highly developed expression in the overwhelming opposition evinced towards the EU, which is correctly regarded as an undemocratic bosses' club. It is a measure of the divorce between the rulers and the ruled that the EU powers chose to make what they hope will be a major step towards consolidating its power and influence only days after European elections in which just 45.3 percent of EU voters cast ballots, many voted for parties opposed to the EU, and in which the lowest turnouts averaging just 26 percent were in the accession countries whose inclusion is hailed as representing the EU's highest achievement to date.

In the most immediate terms, therefore, the signing of the constitution could prove to be an ephemeral success. Even the pro-EU *Guardian* was forced to admit with regards to Blair: "The task is now to sell an abstract document of mind-numbing tedium, with little impact on ordinary lives, to a hostile nation." And all EU governments now face the task of securing support for the constitution of an institution that is hated for its pro-corporate policies, when nine countries, including Britain, are pledged to hold a referendum. Blair's own feelings on his chances of success are indicated by his suggestion that a referendum may not be held until 2006, only months before the treaty must be ratified by all 25-member states.

The task of securing a popular mandate by governments whose central aim is to impoverish their citizens on behalf of their super-rich backers is an impossible one. The EU will continue to be viewed with enmity by working people across Europe. But this will not in itself provide the basis for developing a progressive alternative to the plans of the bourgeoisie. What is required is the adoption of a perspective on which the European working class can assert its own independent interests on a continent-wide basis.

Workers must oppose the attempts of reactionary formations such as UKIP to benefit from popular hostility to the EU and channel this into nationalism and xenophobia.

The working class must set its task as the unification of the continents through the creation of the United Socialist States of Europe. This would provide the essential means through which working people can oppose the drive to militarism by both the US and their own rulers, while defending hard-won social gains and democratic rights from the offensive of the transnational corporations and big business politicians.



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