

Crisis of the European Union commission overshadows signing of EU constitution

Peter Schwarz
12 November 2004

At the end of October, the European Union's 25 government heads signed the "European Constitution Treaty" in Rome in a festive ceremony. This did not bring into force the new EU constitution, however, which must first be ratified by all 25 member states. This ratification process may take at least two years, and its outcome is extremely uncertain. At least 10 states plan to hold referendums—including Spain, France, Ireland, Holland—as well as Britain, Denmark and Poland, where agreement is considered highly questionable.

The treaty-signing ceremony was further overshadowed by a serious crisis, when the EU Commission president-designate, José Manuel Barroso, failed to gain the approval of the European parliament for his new commission. While the heads of state and government posed before the cameras in Rome to demonstrate their unity, a ferocious wrangle was taking place behind the scenes over the composition of the future commission.

For the first time in the history of the European Union, a commission was unable to take up office as planned. Barroso postponed putting forward his commission for approval by the European parliament on October 27, because it appeared highly likely to be rejected. The parliament must either accept or reject the commission as a whole, and is not empowered to vote on individual commissioners, who are put forward by each of the member states. It is up to the commission president to then decide how he allocates responsibilities to each commissioner.

The conflict with the EU parliament developed over the Italian commissioner Rocco Buttiglione, allocated by Barroso for the post of Justice and Internal Affairs. A Catholic with close relations to the Vatican, Buttiglione earned widespread opposition among parliamentarians with his outspoken remarks about homosexuality, which he termed a "sin."

There was also criticism of other commissioners, considered to be biased, corrupt or incompetent. For example, Ingrida Udre, whom Barroso planned to give responsibility for Taxation and Customs Union, is deeply implicated in a corruption affair in Latvia. Neelie Kroes from Holland, who was to supervise European competition, is on the board of several large corporations and was previously active as a lobbyist for the US arms company Lockheed Martin. Else Fischer Boel from Denmark, who as agricultural commissioner

would administer the biggest pot of EU subsidies, is a large-scale farmer, receiving vast amounts of EU subsidy. Laszlo Kovacs from Hungary, designated as energy commissioner, is considered to be thoroughly incompetent.

For weeks, Barroso had refused to respond to the objections raised by members of the parliament because he did not want to disrupt his relations with the heads of national government. As a result, fronts hardened to such an extent that his defeat in the parliament seemed inevitable. In the course of sample voting held by parliamentary fraction groups, the Social Democrats, the Greens and left-wing parties closed ranks against the commission, and the liberals also opposed it by a majority of two thirds. Only the conservatives supported Barroso's suggestion. They represent the largest parliamentary group but do not, however, have a majority. A vote in favour of the commission would only have been possible if the conservatives had united with the fractions of Euro-sceptics and right-wing extremists represented in the EU Parliament—a move that would have lastingly poisoned the atmosphere in the parliament.

Under these circumstances, Barroso pulled back at the last moment and called off the planned vote. During the summit in Rome, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi then withdrew his disputed candidate Buttiglione, who announced his "voluntary" resignation from office. To save face, Berlusconi is alleged to have demanded that other governments also withdraw their candidates. As expected, Barroso replaced both Buttiglione and Urde when he put forward his proposal for a revised commission at the meeting of the European Council on November 3-4.

Particularly in the German press, the reorganisation of the commission at the hands of the EU Parliament was celebrated as a triumph of democracy and progress for the project of European integration.

A comment by the *Frankfurter Rundschau* is typical; it states: "A turning pointing in Europe. After skating for many years on the fringes, beyond which loomed the gulf of complete insignificance, the European Parliament has finally won a name for itself. It has gained in stature by allowing the European Union Commission, which had been patched together by individual governments, to slam up against a wall. That serves the stabilisation of European democracy.... [W]hat Barroso and

the governments may now regard as an embarrassing defeat, is everything but a crisis. Quite the opposite, it is a gain for Europe, because the union has demonstrated that it is better than its reputation. The system of political decision-making and control functions.”

Similar sentiments were expressed in France. Prime Minister Jean Pierre Raffarin explained: “Democracy means taking parliament into account. One cannot impose everything by force.” And François Hollande, the leader of the French socialists, was jubilant, calling Barroso’s retreat “a victory of the European Parliament and proof that democracy is finally being imposed on a European level.”

This is a huge exaggeration that has to little to do with European reality. The struggle for power between the European Parliament and governments over the composition of the commission is not an indication of more democracy. This conflict does nothing to change the orientation of European policy, which is directed ever more openly against the vital interests of the broad population. The fundamental objective of the European Union—the development of Europe into an economic and political great power—is supported by all parliamentary groups in the European Parliament and by all European governments. It is bound up with increasing militarism and non-stop attacks on the social and democratic rights of the population.

It is characteristic that the parliamentarians had no objections to Barroso himself, who heads an extreme-right, neo-liberal government in Portugal and, before his departure to Brussels, had very little popular support amongst Portuguese voters. Moreover, the criticism of Buttiglione only became evident after his tirade against homosexuals. The fact that responsibility for European law was being entrusted to a member of the Italian government, which is conducting its own continuous feud against the judiciary in its own country, and has rigorously subordinated its legislature to the business interests of the head of the government, was not sufficient to elicit a response.

The conflict between parliament, the commission and heads of governments does not revolve around questions of political orientation, and certainly not around democracy. Rather the tensions, contradictions and conflicts that increasingly determine the internal life of the European Union have instead found an outlet. There are contradictions between large and small countries. There are conflicts between governments, which fear a French-German dominance, as well as those which welcome such a dominance as a mechanism for European integration. There is the contrast between “old” and “new Europe”—i.e., between those countries that regard Europe as a counterweight to the US, and those that are prepared to subordinate themselves to Washington. Above all, there is a continually increasing gulf between rich and poor.

As long as the European Union was capable of absorbing internal contradictions by means of a policy of generous subsidies and support, it did not represent an obstacle to

European integration. But as the climate in world economy and world politics has worsened, national egoisms have also intensified inside Europe.

The Iraq war had already split the European Union down the middle. Nothing remains of the wished-for common foreign policy. Later, the issue of a European constitution threatened to collapse over the question of majority decisions and status in the Council of Ministers. The draft that was finally adopted grants less power to the large states and requires unanimous votes for many areas of policy. All of the individual 25 member states have veto powers and can prevent a resolution taking effect.

Finally, a majority of EU governments prevented the French-German favourite, the Belgian Guy Verhofstadt, from taking over the post of commission president. Instead, with the energetic assistance of the German Christian Democrats, Barroso—a man with a much closer orientation to the US—was elevated to office.

The conflict over Barroso’s commission is not least in retaliation for this decision. In parliament, the specific weight of the large countries Germany and France counts for more than in the Council of Ministers, where each country has equal powers and only a few issues can be resolved with a so-called qualified majority. Coincidentally, German politicians currently head the two largest parliament parliamentary groups—the conservatives and Social Democrats—as well as the parliamentary group of the Greens.

The German government itself was unhappy with this recent conflict. According to the French newspaper *Le Monde*, Federal Chancellor Gerhard Schröder is said to have intervened personally with the chairman of the social-democratic parliamentary group, Martin Schulz, to secure support for Barroso’s commission.

The turbulence surrounding the selection of the commission has in any case once again made clear there can be no development of a democratic and socially just Europe under the direction of the European Union, in which business and national interests exert the decisive influence. A united Europe, in which the needs and interests of the population are brought to the fore, can only come about through the development of a grassroots movement aimed at the formation of a United Socialist States of Europe.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact