

Brussels treaty reveals divisions in the European Union

Peter Schwarz
27 June 2007

After 34 hours of contentious political negotiations, the EU heads of state and government finally agreed on a treaty in Brussels in the early hours of Saturday morning, June 23. The accord is supposed to take the place of the failed European Constitution.

However, details still have to be ironed out over the coming months and approved by a diplomatic conference. Then, all 27 member states will have to ratify the treaty. In Ireland, and possibly also in the Czech Republic, the matter will be subject to a referendum. If everything runs according to plan, the new treaty will come into force before the European elections in June 2009.

Nothing remains in the present treaty of the vision of a politically unified Europe, which had been the justification for the original project for a European Constitution. The ugly face of the EU is revealed for what it really is—a grouping of capitalist cliques that quarrel, mutually extort each other, hurl wild insults at one another and only take their own interests into consideration.

On only one question was there agreement in Brussels: that the general population should be kept completely out of any political decisions. While the respective sizes of each country's population were constantly used as an argument during the two days of haggling about future voting weights, the government chiefs were careful to ensure that the general population has not the slightest influence either on the treaty or on any future decisions of the European Union.

If there were to be a referendum over the new treaty in France and the Netherlands, where the original draft constitution was rejected in 2005 in by popular vote, or in England, where departing Prime Minister Tony Blair had promised a referendum, there is every possibility that it would be rejected again.

To make it easier for governments to pass the treaty without recourse to any electorate, the new text dispenses with every symbol that might infer, even distantly, an autonomous European Union—an EU anthem, flag and even the term “constitution.” French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende, as well as Tony Blair and his successor Gordon Brown, have already announced that they will ratify the treaty without a popular vote.

The text of the treaty is written in a style that is impenetrable for mere mortals and can only be understood by specialist lawyers. A typical paragraph reads: “Title VI (former Title VIII of the existing *TEU*) will be amended as agreed in the 2004 IGC.” The Belgian foreign minister, Karel de Gucht, said fittingly: “The EU

constitution was supposed to be legible. This text is supposed to be as illegible as possible.”

Above all, the German government, which prepared and led the Brussels summit, had endeavoured to preserve the institutional regulations from the original draft constitution. By abolishing the unanimity principle, strengthening the central institutions and raising the voting weight of the larger states, it wants to enable the EU to reach rapid decisions and to play a greater role in world politics, as well as increase German dominance of the European Union.

That only partially succeeded. The fierce conflicts at the summit forced the German government to water down the original draft and make numerous concessions.

Above all, Poland vehemently opposed Germany's ambitions for more influence in the European Union. While Chancellor Angela Merkel held one-on-one talks with President Lech Kaczynski in Brussels, alternating pressure and flattery, his twin brother, Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski, organised the resistance in Warsaw. On Friday evening, when Lech slowly started to soften, Jaroslaw stepped before the television cameras in Poland and announced a Polish veto.

There followed by turns extortion and insults. Merkel reacted by threatening to isolate the country and to agree to the treaty without Poland. A member of the Polish government, Roman Giertych of the extreme right-wing League of Polish Families, accused the German chancellor of employing “Nazi methods” and “Hände hoch!” politics.

Then, Sarkozy and Blair took over the negotiations. In discussions with President Kaczynski and in long telephone calls with the Polish prime minister, they gained the Kaczynskis' agreement through further concessions. The disputed “doubled majority” principle (a majority decision requires 55 percent of the member states, representing 65 percent of the population) will be introduced, but only from 2014, with a transitional period until 2017. Until then, each country can demand that votes be taken according to the old rules. Poland will thus keep its relatively high voting weight for 10 years.

The British government also achieved its numerous “red lines.” Thus, the Charter of Fundamental Rights agreed on in 2000 will become legally binding in all member states—except in Britain, where it will not be possible to turn to the courts to uphold the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Charter. If Turkey were to insist on such a regulation, it would be considered a final reason to

block its accession to the EU.

The French president was able to ensure that the reference to “free and undistorted competition” was removed from the aims of the European Union. He claimed this was a necessary gesture towards French voters, who hate any form of “neo-liberalism.” At the same time, Sarkozy gained a cover for his own economic policies, which include state interventions to defend French interests.

This unleashed a hysterical reaction in the British press, which regards any attack on the free market as sacrilege. In several telephone calls, Gordon Brown, who becomes prime minister on Wednesday, pushed Tony Blair to oppose the French request, although he had already agreed to it.

The new treaty means that for the first time in its history, the EU will have its own foreign minister with his or her own budget and diplomatic service. However, on British insistence, the position may not be called “foreign minister.” Decisions regarding foreign policy—as well as taxation and social policies—will continue to be subject to the unanimity principle, so that binding resolutions will be relatively rare.

Majority decisions—starting from 2009 under the old rules and from 2017 under the new method—will only apply in the area of community law, justice and domestic policy, whereby Britain was able to ensure it received special rights.

Also a novelty is the office of a European Union president, who will be elected for a term of two-and-a-half years. In the past, the government leader of the presiding member state had been European Council president for a term of six months. Under the new treaty, the specialised ministerial councils will continue with the previous rotation principle.

The result of the Brussels summit met with mixed reactions. Proponents of a stronger EU judged it a failure. The Italian government head, Romano Prodi, spoke of “a step backwards” and commented that “a common will to seek progress is missing.” On the other hand, Jaroslaw Kaczynski rated the result a success. “Poland has gained practically everything it wanted,” he maintained.

In Paris, the summit was hailed as a “success for France and Nicolas Sarkozy” (*Le Figaro*) and heralded a revival of the “Franco-German motor” (*Libération*). In Germany, the content of the new treaty was largely regarded with scepticism. The balance sheet of the summit was poor; the resolutions did not go far enough, it was said in numerous commentaries.

A positive note was that the blockade had been broken, which had begun two years earlier with the failure of the constitution in referendums in France and the Netherlands. That provided new possibilities for Germany of seizing the initiative and of placing itself at the head of those countries that favoured a stronger European Union.

The new treaty expressly envisages such a development. If at least one third of the states can agree on a common political project that does not command a majority in the EU as a whole, it can still be implemented under the terms of the “strengthened cooperation,” a kind of union within the union, which other states can join later.

Many press comments following the Brussels summit favoured

such a “two-speed Europe.”

Thus, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* writes: “The misery of the EU is that the majority that favours the unity of the union can be led around by the nose by the minority.”

“However, those who would like to make Europe a player on the world stage,” it continues, “must abandon their recourse to objections.” The road to a more successful union is “via the intensified cooperation of those countries that want to progress faster than others.... Even if that means creating lasting zones of varying political integration into Europe, that is still better than stagnation at a low level.”

Italian Prime Minister Prodi also strongly favours such a course. After making sharp attacks on the Polish and British governments, he explained that Rome was now working on the basis of a two-speed Europe. In May, Prodi, the former EU Commission president, had threatened the European parliament that Italy would rather allow the summit to fail than agree to rotten compromises. Europe should not again become “the petty appendage of the Asian continent,” he said. A group of “champion states” could be “the best means, to a more strongly integrated union.”

Here, the actual significance of the Brussels summit becomes clear. Out of the quarrels and disputes about the future form of the European Union, the attempts of the most powerful states to organise Europe under their supremacy are growing. Germany and France are united in this goal, but not regarding which one should assume the leading role, which Berlin does not want to leave to Paris and Paris will not leave to Berlin.

Thus, the contradictions between the large and small states are not only being intensified between the pro-American and those seeking a more independent role, but also between the European great powers themselves. The aggravation of national contradictions—the quarrels, extortions and insults that showed their ugly face in Brussels—is inevitable.

They demonstrate the inability of the ruling capitalist cliques to unite Europe on a progressive basis. This can happen only from below, through the unification of working people in the struggle for the Socialist United States of Europe.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact