

After the European elections

# EU torn by conflict over European Commission president

Peter Schwarz  
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In the wake of last month's European elections, a fierce dispute has emerged within the EU over the future president of the European Commission. The focus of the controversy is whether the former Luxembourg prime minister, Jean-Claude Juncker, should succeed José Manuel Barroso as the head of the powerful European Commission (EC). However, behind this issue lie a clash of interests and national conflicts that place the future of the EU in question.

Juncker stood in the European elections as the leading candidate of the European People's Party (EPP), which, with 221 of 751 seats, became the strongest party in the European Parliament. Now the majority in the parliament, and Juncker himself, are demanding that as the "election victor" he be declared EC president.

The Social Democrats, Greens and European Left support Juncker. The outgoing leader of the European Greens, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, called on his party colleagues to support Juncker's election. The leading social democratic candidate in the European elections, Martin Schulz (a member of Germany's Social Democratic Party—SPD), declared that Juncker's election was a "fundamental question." It was a "democratic tradition that the candidate of the leading party receive the mandate," he said.

SYRIZA leader Alexis Tsipras, the leading candidate of the European Left in last month's elections, said: "The presentation of any other nominee would effectively discredit the entire recent election, turning it, after the fact, into a charade. This is a basic democratic principle. It is a moral obligation of the European Council to put forward the candidate who secured the leading position in the European election."

In Juncker's own camp, support is more muted. German Chancellor Angela Merkel hesitated for some time to stand openly behind Juncker. She finally supported his candidacy under growing pressure from the media. In the European election campaign, Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) refrained from using Juncker's image. Instead, the face of the chancellor appeared on posters, even though she was not standing for election.

Viktor Orban and Fredrik Reinfeldt, the government leaders

of Hungary and Sweden, whose parties also belong to the EPP, categorically reject Juncker's candidacy. The same applies to the right-wing Dutch prime minister, Mark Rutte. The opposition to Juncker is headed by British Prime Minister David Cameron. He has even threatened to leave the EU if Juncker is elected Commission president.

Cameron considers Juncker's nomination by the European Parliament an attempt to shift the EU's centre of power away from the national states towards a central European institution. In a guest column published in several European newspapers last Friday, he wrote: "To accept such a claim... would shift power from national governments to the European parliament without voters' approval."

The British prime minister is insisting on the right of the European Council—comprising the heads of state or government of the EU member states—to nominate the Commission president. In his view, the parliamentary deputies should only then vote on this nomination. He accuses the members of the European Parliament of inventing "a new process whereby they are trying to both choose and elect the candidate." This is "a power grab through the back door," he has charged.

With his hard-line stance against Juncker, Cameron is responding in part to domestic political pressures. The anti-European Union UK Independence Party (UKIP) emerged the strongest British party in the European elections, and in Cameron's own Tory party, the opponents of the EU are gaining influence.

Cameron also fears for the interests of the UK financial sector and Britain's influence in the EU should Juncker become Commission president.

The author of the idea of standing European-wide lead candidates for the European elections and making the winner the Commission president is Martin Schulz. In addition to the Social Democrats and the EPP, the Liberals, the Greens, the European Left and the Pirates also stood their own lead candidates. By mutual agreement, the largest factions in the parliament committed themselves to unite behind only one of these lead candidates for Commission president.

Especially in Germany, this was presented as a big step

toward the democratization of the EU and was made a central issue in the election campaign. Finally, the politicians and media proclaimed, voters can elect a “face” and decide on the leadership of the powerful Commission in Brussels.

In an interview with the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the 84-year-old theoretician Jürgen Habermas went so far as to claim that the nomination of lead candidates had unleashed a “wave of democratisation” in Europe. The election of a candidate other than Juncker as Commission chief would “strike at the heart of the European project,” he declared.

This is nonsense. With less than 30 percent of the vote going to the EPP in a turnout of 43 percent, Juncker lacks any democratic mandate. Voters in many countries know nothing about the man. The supporters of giving the European Parliament a more important role want to strengthen not democracy, but the European institutions that are hated by broad layers of the European population.

Support for this deceit by Tsipras only underscores that the European Left stands unconditionally behind the EU and its policy of attacking the working class in order to promote the interests of finance capital.

The strengthening of the European Parliament at the expense of the European Council would also raise the relative weight of Germany and other large states in the EU. With 98 of 751 members of the European Parliament (MEPs), Germany has much more influence in the European Parliament than in the European Council, where a substantial majority or even unanimity among the 28 members is required on most issues.

As for Britain, Cameron has isolated himself by resigning from the EPP in 2009 and setting up the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) as a separate group. In addition to the British Tories and Northern Ireland’s Ulster Unionists, the ECR includes the Polish PiS of Jaroslaw Kaczynski and the right-wing populist Danish People’s Party.

The ECR has little influence over the decisions of the European Parliament, since the EPP and Social Democrats, who together have a majority, generally collaborate closely. This week, the ECR accepted into its ranks the Alternative for Germany party (AfD), which rejects the euro, exacerbating the tensions between Cameron and Merkel.

The bitter disputes over the EU Commission are ultimately an expression of irreconcilable contradictions within the European Union. Since the financial crisis of 2008, the economic and political gulf between the individual member states has grown ever wider.

While Germany has recorded slight growth and dominates Europe economically, France and many southern European countries have experienced years of stagnation.

Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, whose Democratic Party has the largest number of MEPs in the EU’s Social Democratic group, has made his support for Juncker contingent on the austerity measures of recent years being moderated by a program of investment, job-creation and reform. Renzi is not

pleading for a more socially progressive policy. By easing the austerity measures, he wants to create room to manoeuvre for more radical attacks on the working class along the lines of Germany’s Agenda 2010.

Cameron, who represents the interests of the London banks, wants to reduce the EU to a free trade zone that gives capital free rein and makes Europe—as he wrote in his newspaper piece—“more open, outward-looking, flexible and competitive.”

From the British side, Juncker is depicted as a representative of a centralized Europe that supports state interventionism in the tradition of France, Italy and other southern European countries. This is a gross distortion, considering that Juncker was for 18 years head of government in one of the most lucrative financial centres of Europe, handed over hundreds of billions in aid to the banks as head of the euro group, and has played a central role in the EU’s austerity policies.

The German government faces a dilemma. If Merkel drops Juncker, she opens herself to the charge of electoral deceit and undemocratic machinations. If she lines up behind Juncker, she intensifies the conflict with the British government, whose support she needs within the EU to push through bank-friendly economic measures and aggressive military policies.

To this end, Merkel travelled to Sweden last Sunday for a mini-summit with Juncker’s opponents. To demonstrate for the benefit of the media that they all sit “in the same boat,” Merkel, Cameron and Holland’s Rutte sat together with Sweden’s government head Fredrik Reinfeldt and rowed across a lake. Nevertheless, there was no agreement concerning the Commission presidency.

The conflicts over the leadership of the Commission underscore that it is impossible to unite Europe on a democratic and progressive basis within the framework of capitalism. This question, along with the struggle against militarism and war, was at the heart of the European election campaign of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit in Germany and the Socialist Equality Party in Britain.

“Only the formation of workers’ governments in every country and the unification of Europe on a socialist basis can prevent the decline of Europe into nationalism and war, and create the conditions for utilizing and developing its extensive resources and productive forces in the interests of society as a whole”, declared the joint PSG/SEP election manifesto.



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