



6th Asian-European Labour Forum
REVITALISING ECONOMIC DEMOCRACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY -
A PROJECT FOR THE GLOBAL LABOUR MOVEMENT?
17-18 November 2015
Singapore

BACKGROUND

Status quo: Capital wins, labour loses

“It is hard to avoid the conclusion that irrespective of country, the ‘workers’ voice’ has been systematically choked off, and the scope for collective action increasingly constrained in the pursuit of neoliberal economic policy. [...] the failure to arrest rising inequality together with the very slow recovery from the 2008-09 crisis and current fears of deflation provide ample testimony that current policy responses are not supportable either from a social or an economic point of view.”¹

A common critique of neoliberal development paradigm refers to its obsession with growth rates, free trade and deregulation and its failure to bring about sustainable and equitable development. Extreme imbalances in the global economy, growing social divide, mass unemployment, and precarious working conditions are symptomatic of the dynamic of capitalism in the 21st century which has espoused enormous power and wealth concentration in the hands of a small circle of economic elites. Big private businesses of industry, commerce and finance rule while acting on the dictum of profit maximization. At the same time fundamental principles such as democracy, participation, transparency and accountability are largely undermined within economic processes. Thus, growth partly carries on while basic needs stay unmet.

Many states hail democratic credentials in their political governance. Yet, they fail to acknowledge that the economy virtually lacks the essence of a democracy to uphold people’s right to economic participation and provide effective public control of power. The current vulnerability of political democracy in the absence of economic democracy is mirrored sharply by the sheer impotence of policy-makers vis-à-vis the power of capital and markets.

Reversing the status-quo: Economic democracy and trade unionism

Social and labour movements in the global North and South are demanding for an alternative socio-economic order to the current economic system. Within this context the democratisation of the economy has (re)emerged as a promising transformation project.²

Economic democracy, while not uniformly defined, is essentially about regulating market mechanisms and corporate activities, creating a greater plurality and diversity of economic power,

¹ Van Klaveren, Gregory, Schulten (eds) (2015), *Minimum Wages, Collective Bargaining and Economic Development in Asia and Europe – A Labour Perspective*, p.xvii.

² H.-J. Urban (2010), *Statement: Neue oeko-soziale Wirtschaftsdemokratie?-Ueberlegungen zu einem gewerkschaftlichen und gesellschaftlichen Transformationsprojekt*, in FES (eds), *Zukunft der Demokratie Demokratie der Zukunft*, FES.

providing a system of representative checks and balances, enlarging the sphere of democratic decision making, redistribution of income and assets and subordinating the market to the interests of public welfare.³ Some practical ideas towards this direction include the creation of worker cooperatives and public banks, participatory budgeting, and the international harmonization of environmental, social and trade regulations. Current endeavours to legislate a minimum wage in various countries in Southeast Asia or a minimum corporate tax in the EU are positive steps in the direction of regulating the market to prevent a race to the bottom. Encouraging examples of successful and sustainable small-scale cooperatives can often be found in developing countries.

For the labour movement the idea of economic democracy is not new.⁴ Since the 1920s, the labour movement mostly focused on different approaches of democratizing the production process within enterprises. After World War II, trade unions in Europe succeeded in institutionalising co-determination via work councils and employee board members. Worldwide, the labour movement has a long tradition in cooperative production and distribution, even though such cooperatives have turned into commercial enterprises in most countries in the course of time.

Yet for the past three decades, trade unions have been widely blamed for being reactive and ineffective in providing progressive solutions against the background of capitalist excrement. The idea of economic democracy offers a forward-looking vision of people's and communities' empowerment which could revive trade unionism as a social movement fighting for a genuinely alternative socio-economic order.⁵

OBJECTIVES

Against the outlined background, the 6th Asian-European Labour Forum will convene for 1.5 days to discuss the revitalisation of the struggle for economic democracy as a an urgent project for the labour movement across the globe. Among the key questions are:

- 1) What shall be the shape of economic democracy of the 21st century?
- 2) What and how can unions contribute to transform the current state of the global economy?

In addition to the usual conference setting, there will be a **public launch of the edited book "Minimum Wages, Collective Bargaining and Economic Development in Asia and Europe – A Labour Perspective"** which contains contributions by individual members of the AELF.

PARTICIPANTS/SPEAKERS

The workshop will convene 20-25 members of the AELF who are labour researchers from various Asian and European labour think tanks, and labour research and training institutes. Similar to previous AELF meetings, a limited number of guest speakers will enrich the discussions. Speaker and moderator slots will be assigned upon confirmation of participants.

DATE AND VENUE

17-18 November 2015

Hotel Parkroyal on Beach Road

www.parkroyalhotels.com/BeachRoad

³ N. Johannisova, S. Wolf (2012), *Economic democracy: A path for the future?*

⁴ H. Martens, *Neue Wirtschaftsdemokratie*, in *Das Argument* 29/2011.

⁵ R. Hyman (2011), *Wirtschaftsdemokratie: Eine erneut aktuelle Idee?*, in *Gegen Blende Das Gewerkschaftliche Debattenmagazin* (Mai/Juni 2011)

PROGRAMME⁶

Day 1 - Monday, 16 November 2015

Arrival of international participants
19:00 h Welcome dinner

Day 2 – Tuesday, 17 November 2015

9:00 h **Welcome Remarks**
Surya Tjandra, Executive Director, Trade Union Rights Center, Indonesia
Indrasari Tjandraningsih, Researcher, Akatiga, Indonesia
Julia Mueller, Director, FES Office for Regional Cooperation in Asia, Singapore

9:15 h **Session 1: *Keynote Speech: Capitalism in Crisis - Ideas for a New World Economy***

Guiding questions:

- *What are the roots of global economy's current dynamics?*
- *Is economic democracy a truly systemic alternative – why?*
- *What role shall the labour movement assume?*

N.N.

Moderator: Indrasari Tjandraningsih, Akatiga, Indonesia

Q&A / Discussion

10.15 h Coffee break

10:45 h **Session 2: *Economic Democracy in Asia and Europe: History and Current Discourse***

Guiding questions:

- *What is the concept of economic democracy about? How did it emerge historically?*
- *What are successful approaches to democratise the economy? Where (country examples) and why did they work?*
- *How is economic democracy currently being discussed, if at all?*

On Europe: Daniel Seikel, Head of European Policies Research Unit, Hans-Boeckler-Stiftung, Germany

On Asia: N.N.

Moderator: Surya Tjandra, Trade Union Rights Center, Indonesia

Q&A / Discussion

⁶ Confirmations for speakers' and moderators' roles are still to be finalised.

12:15 h Lunch

13:30 h **Session 3: Economic Democracy in Practice**

Focus Group Discussions

Group 1: Co-determination of workers on enterprise and company level

Guiding questions:

- *What avenues of co-determination for workers exist? What are good examples and challenges?*
- *Can the model of co-determination via companies' supervisory boards be a role model?*

Introductory input:

Hansjörg Herr, Professor in Department of Economics, Berlin School of Economics and Law

Yongjian Hu, Professor, Department of Economics, Tianjin University of Finance and Economics, China

Moderator: Nohjin Kwi, Standing Advisor, Federation of Korean Trade Unions Research Centre

Group 2: Worker-owned cooperatives

Guiding questions:

- *How do workers' cooperatives work? What are their aims? What are successful examples?*
- *What are factors for their efficiency and how do they contribute to a more democratic economy? What are their challenges?*

Introductory input:

Maarten van Klaveren, Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Labour Studies, University of Amsterdam

Evelyn Wong, Independent Consultant, Singapore (tbc)

Moderator: Bela Galgoczi, Senior Researcher, European Trade Union Institute, Belgium

Group 3: Cooperative Banking

Guiding questions:

- *What is cooperative banking, how does it work and what aims does it pursue?*
- *What are factors for their efficiency and how do they contribute to a more democratic economy? What are their challenges?*

Introductory input:

Biju Varkey, Professor, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, India

Catherine Vincent, Senior Researcher, Institute of Economic and Social Research, France

Moderator: Elena Gerasimova, Director, Centre for Social and Labour Rights, Russia

15:00 h Coffee break

15:30 h Session 3 continued: Presentation of Main Findings from Working Groups

Moderator: Denis Gregory, Academic Coordinator, Ruskin College Oxford, UK

16:15 h **Session 4: The Labour Movement in Asia and Europe: Challenges and Opportunities for an Active Trade Union Policy**

Guiding questions:

- *What are the current key challenges for trade unions in Asia and Europe? How do trade unions react to these challenges?*
- *To what extent have trade unions been able to contribute to the improvement of workers' working and living conditions?*
- *To what extent are trade unions and the labour movement currently able to influence public opinions and political decision making?*

Christopher Ng, Regional Secretary, UNI Apro, Singapore

Melisa Serrano, University of the Philippines

Frank Hoffer, Senior Research Officer, ILO, Geneva

Salvo Leonardi, Researcher, Institute of Economic and Social Research, Italy

Moderator: Line Eldring, Senior Researcher, FAFO Research Foundation, Norway

Q&A / Discussion

17:45 h End of Day 1

Day 3 - Wednesday, 18 November 2015

9:00 h **Session 5: Special Focus on the Indonesian Labour Movement – Challenges and Achievements**

Guiding questions:

- *What is the significance of the Indonesian labour movement in Indonesia's society of today? Is there a unified agenda for action?*
- *What were key successes of the trade unions in recent years? How were they achieved?*
- *What challenges lie ahead of the Indonesian labour movement? How can they be overcome?*

N.N., Indonesia

N.N., Indonesia

Moderator: Sakdina Chatrakul Na Ayudhya, Independent Labour Researcher, Thailand

	Q&A / Discussion
10:30 h	Coffee break
10:50 h	Session 6: Trade Unions as Change Agents – Expanding the Sphere of Influence Focus Group Discussions <i>Group 1: Organisational strengthening</i> Moderator: Erwin Schweisshelm, Resident Director, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Vietnam Office <i>Group 2: Organizing and mobilising</i> Moderator: Sergio Grassi, Resident Director, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Indonesia Office <i>Group 3: Promoting international solidarity</i> Moderator: Abdul Qadir, Programme Coordinator and Advisor, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Pakistan Office
12:15 h	Lunch
13:15 h	Session 7: A “Fishbowl Discussion”: How Could Economic Democracy Become a (New) Project for Labour Movements in Asia and Europe? <i>Guiding questions:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>To what extent can economic democracy be a project for the labour movement in Asia and Europe?</i>• <i>How can the abstraction of the concept be broken down to make it comprehensible to everyone?</i>• <i>What strategies should trade unions pursue to mobilise their members and the wider public for this goal?</i>• <i>How can an international solidarity be forged to work towards the vision of an economic democracy?</i> Karamat Ali, Executive Director, Pakistan Institute for Labour Education and Research Kea Tijdens, Research Coordinator, Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Labour Studies, University of Amsterdam, Netherlands Greg Randolph, Deputy Director, JustJobs Network, India (tbc) Hansjörg Herr, Professor in Department of Economics, Berlin School of Economics and Law Moderator: Julia Mueller, Director, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Office for Regional Cooperation in Asia, Singapore Discussion
15:00 h	Conclusions

- 15:30 h End of AELF6
- 16:15 h Departure for book launch:
- 17:00 h Book launch **“Minimum Wages, Collective Bargaining and Economic Development
in Asia and Europe – A Labour Perspective”**
Venue: EU Center Singapore (tbc)
- 18.30 h Reception
- 19.30 h Transfer to hotel