

ETUC Statement on UK Referendum

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Towards the UK referendum

The European Union is facing grave challenges at the moment, and the ETUC would prefer to see the UK involved – together with other Member States – in resolving them, rather than turning towards national isolation.

In common with our British affiliate the TUC, the ETUC believes EU membership is beneficial for working people in the UK, and that millions of them could find themselves worse off if Britain votes to leave, although we also want to ensure that the British deal does not create a rash of legal exceptions and restrictions across Europe.

Legislation enforcing basic rights like paid annual leave, limits on working time, equal pay, parental leave, workplace safety and fair treatment for part-time and agency workers have been won at EU level by trade union campaigning. There is no guarantee that these rights will be maintained in national law by the current British government.

Brexit would not only threaten rights at work. A growing number of research studies warn it would also put at risk hundreds of thousands of jobs in the UK, and provoke a drop in GDP, consumer spending and the value of sterling. At the same time, it would weaken the EU economically and politically, undermining the interests of workers across Europe.

The interests of working people, their families and communities should have a high profile in the referendum campaign, and unions need to play a major role in emphasising those interests.

The ETUC strongly supports the UK remaining part of the EU, and believes this is vital for the welfare of British workers. What Europe needs now, to restore confidence in the splintering EU project, is investment, high quality jobs and decent pay, not mean-spirited steps to rob low-paid migrants and mobile EU citizens of their rights. Punishing migrant and mobile workers could provoke a backlash against British people working or claiming benefits in other Member States, or even worse a downward spiral of opportunistic exemptions from EU rules that could rip the heart out of European unity.

The ETUC further supports the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NIC-ICTU), which has called upon workers and their families to use their vote in the EU referendum and to vote to remain for the stability of the economy of Northern Ireland, for the security of their jobs and for their rights as workers.

The UK deal in the EU Council

PM David Cameron has secured a deal that exempts the UK from important duties of EU membership, but his agenda is not ours, and is not supported by our British affiliate, the TUC. It reflects in-fighting at the heart of the Prime Minister's Conservative Party rather than protecting the interests of British workers. We believe the concessions to the British Government's arm-twisting tactics are in breach of the

EU treaties and damage Social Europe. The British deal is at risk of infringing basic principles like freedom of movement, equal treatment at work and non-discrimination. The danger is that any Member State will feel it has the right to reject commonly agreed rules, using Britain as the precedent, and creating a 'self-service' EU. Whatever happens with the referendum in June, the UK's concessions leave a weakened union. Already, some EU countries are considering cutting child benefit payments to migrant workers. And there is talk of further referendums on EU policy taking place in others. After the referendum, the ETUC will act to oppose exceptions and restrictions being applied in other Member States, and press for tighter conditions for granting such exceptions to the UK as well.

European trade unions will fight to end limits on free movement, and will fight even harder now to ensure that the Commission delivers on its promise of a strong pillar of social rights for Europe and for a fair revision of the Posting of Workers Directive. Instead of scapegoating migrant workers, we need tough action against those employers who exploit them, and the widespread practice of collective bargaining so as to establish a fair rate for the job for all workers.

Europe must be reformed in workers' interests. Workers in the UK and in the rest of the EU need a just society, investment for quality jobs, greater workplace democracy, the right to free movement and equal treatment, and no discrimination on social and trade union rights and on civil liberties.

The agreement imposes new rules to foster competitiveness by cutting regulation. The ETUC opposes the introduction of a "burden reduction implementation mechanism". In the UK, this is translated into the new principle of "one-in, three-out" for new legislation. Such a quantitative approach will not guarantee high quality legislation.

The ETUC further regrets the lack of clarity regarding the consequences for economic governance and deeper integration in the euro area, especially regarding the specific provisions of the Single rulebook.

The ETUC is ready to develop more in depth analysis of the consequences of the deal after the result, and effects of the referendum are known.