

**GMB**

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# European News

February 2016

## EU Referendum – the die has been cast

**This is the biggest decision of our generation. The vote is about our future, about a vision of what a social Europe can bring, so it's time to be positive about the benefits to our economy, jobs and our environment, says GMB.**

The GMB Central Executive Council, meeting on 9 February, considered the progress in the renegotiation of the UK membership of the European Union and the forthcoming referendum, and agreed to issue a statement on the GMB position.

Following heated debate at the EU Summit on 18-19 February, agreement was sealed on a package of reforms which David Cameron claims give the UK a 'special status' in the EU. On his return to London, the Prime Minister confirmed that the referendum would be called for Thursday 23 June 2016.

Cameron's reform agenda was not our reform agenda, but this is a sideshow to the real question we now have to focus on – *should the UK remain a member of the EU or leave the EU?*

Tim Roache, GMB General Secretary, said: "A vote on whether the UK should remain a member of the European Union or not is rushing towards us and is the biggest decision in a generation for GMB members and their families.

This is a massive moment which could dramatically change the lives of working people and their families for generations to come. Have no doubt this vote matters, it matters a lot.

One of the worst kept secrets is that the EU needs reform. The vision of a social Europe raising living standards and building the economies of new member states has lost its way. In truth, it has been diverted by business interests over working families.

The exploitation of people desperate for a better life has been growing in recent years. Undercutting wage rates and denying local people jobs has become the visible signs of this corporate exploitation. It's wrong, it's outrageous and it is completely stoppable. Not by voting to leave the EU, but by demanding a return to that vision of a social Europe.

Does anybody actually believe that the European laws on things like maternity and parental leave, health and safety protections, equal rights for part time workers, TUPE, paid holidays and so much more would be protected by the Conservatives, UKIP or any of their fellow travellers? Dream on if you do.

This crucial vote should not be about a protest or to save David Cameron's skin but about our future, your future. During the referendum campaign we will all be bombarded with opinions, statistics, misinformation, the media telling you how to think and plain old-fashioned lies and prejudice.

GMB will be honest and informative throughout the process. GMB will not seek or promote any argument that pitches worker against worker. This coming vote is about our future, about a vision of what a social Europe can bring. It's time to be positive about the benefits to our economy, jobs and our environment.

The closeness of the polls must be the wakeup call for those in Westminster and Brussels that the British people are serious about change and change for the better, but the harsh straight fact is that we cannot get that change by voting to leave the EU.

To enable the union to get our very specific messages across, our campaign will not be allied with any of the 'remain' organisations."

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*TUC has published a list of our [employment rights](#) at risk from Brexit. GMB has produced a range of materials which are available across our regions.*

### GMB urges Osborne to support EU tax justice

GMB has sent a joint letter to Chancellor George Osborne, urging him to take action to ensure companies publically disclose their profits, tax and assets in each country in which they operate. Led by the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) and co-signed by UK trade unions organised in the public sector, GMB is calling for binding EU rules on tax justice, including public country-by-country reporting. These are vital for creating a transparent and fair tax system, giving tax dodgers nowhere to hide, and would allow the EU to pave the way for creating strong rules at the international level too.

## GMB steel workers in Brussels protest to save jobs

GMB members joined 5,000 steelworkers from across Europe in Brussels on 15 February in protest at the lack of EU action on saving jobs and wider communities in the sector. The protest coincided with a special high-level EU stakeholders' conference on energy intensive industries.



The EU decision earlier in the month to impose a duty of 9.2-13% on dumped Chinese rebar shows the EU Commission is not serious about supporting Europe's steel industry.

## EU Commission in murky waters over new investor court proposals

German judges have questioned the legality and necessity of the new Investment Court System (ICS), a half-baked EU Commission proposal to try to counter major public opposition to investor-trade dispute settlements in international trade deals.

According to the judges, the ICS has no legal basis and would not stop foreign investors from being able to sue national and local governments for regulating in the public interest. The process for appointing judges to the ICS also does not meet international standards for legal independence, despite Commission assurances of full transparency and public scrutiny.

This is yet another thorn in the side of the EU Commission, which continues to insist on negotiating the discredited corporate EU-US trade deal (TTIP) in the face of mounting opposition. GMB is campaigning for the end to this and all other business-driven trade agreements.

Read Corporate Europe Observatory's new report on *The Zombie ISDS* [here](#).

Market economy status (MES) should be out of the question for China. David Cameron is its cheerleader. Steel imports from China have doubled over the past year and a half, causing heavy job losses and plant closures across the sector.

As many as 3.5mn jobs in the European industry are at risk. The EU Commission has said it will launch a public consultation in the spring on whether or not China should be granted MES, but our members need action on steel now!

## GMB Brussels supports #HeartUnions campaign



Trade union colleagues from across Europe joined GMB on 8 February outside the UK Embassy in Brussels, in support of TUC's [#HeartUnions](#) campaign. The campaign aims to raise awareness of the extremely serious threats posed by the Tory Government's Trade Union Bill, and has been an opportunity to showcase trade unions' vital work and celebrate our key successes in improving workers' rights.

## EU-Japan trade deal

The ETUC and Japanese Trade Union Confederation have issued a joint [statement](#) on the EU-Japan trade agreement, currently under negotiation. They are demanding full ratification and implementation of core ILO Conventions, firm commitments to create decent jobs, effective labour enforcement provisions, a guaranteed right to regulate in the public interest, social and environmental public procurement, the full exclusion of public services, and no investor-state dispute settlement.

## EU Trade Union Action Update

**Greece:** Over 50,000 people took part in a general strike and protest this month against **pension reforms** which will see further cuts to benefits and increases to retirement age.

**Czech Republic:** Unions have signed a historic first collective agreement covering nearly 70,000 **state employees** and guaranteeing working conditions, with a particular focus on health and safety.

**Portugal:** **Public sector** unions went on strike at the end of January as part of their campaign to defend the 35-hour week. Unions have already managed to negotiate hundreds of local agreements protecting working hours.

**France:** **Energy** sector workers have held protests, rallies and gone on strike over planned cuts to pay and thousands of jobs. **Taxi drivers** took to the streets in protest at new digital ride-sharing companies such as **Uber**. A national action day was held last month by **public sector** unions calling for pay increases. With wages frozen, over 5mn public workers have seen their purchasing power fall by up to 10% since the start of the financial crisis.

**Germany:** **Public services** union **Ver.di** has put **temporary contracts** on the bargaining agenda for 2016, alarmed at the increase in precarious short-term work and its effect on young workers in particular.

**Italy:** There has been international outrage over the abduction, torture and murder in Cairo of a young Italian academic researching **independent trade unions** in Egypt. Sign the petition to the Egyptian government [here](#).

**Lithuania:** With the support of **ETUC** and other European colleagues, Lithuanian trade unions took part in a parliament debate on 10 February on respecting **social dialogue** and the threat to workers of ongoing revisions to the **labour code**.

**Hungary:** Thousands of **public sector** workers took part in a protest on 13 February against low pay and cuts to jobs and service. They urge government action to prevent skilled workers from leaving the country.

**Steel:** Steel workers in **Italy** have been protesting against threats to jobs and conditions in the troubled sector, amid accusations the government has not respected a recent agreement. **Latvian** trade unions have requested a meeting with the Prime Minister to find solutions to the growing crisis in the sector.

# Last Chance Social Europe?

by Christina Colclough, Head of EU Affairs at UNI Europa trade union federation



The European Commission came to office in late 2014 under the warning of new President Jean-Claude Juncker that this would be

the Commission of the Last Chance. So he recognised the major problems we are facing – but how far are they prepared to go to do something about them? Over a year later, GMB, UNI Europa and all of our trade union colleagues are still waiting for commitments on fair, decent and quality jobs and an end to exploitation, undercutting and precarious work to be delivered.

The EU Commission and European governments need to re-establish the Social Dimension of the EU and ensure a balance between the interests of workers and those of business, currently so hopelessly out of kilter. We have warned them of the consequences of not doing this and keep pushing for change. The European institutions need to understand that quality jobs and decent and fair working conditions cannot and must not be regarded as a burden on companies.

Regulation can be positive for

workers, business, consumers and the environment alike. No one wants overcomplicated or unnecessary rules but equally the EU ‘better regulation’ agenda cannot be used to undermine vital rights and protections, and UNI Europa and GMB are closely monitoring any attempts to do so.

Reducing regulation actually costs business more money in the long run in terms of increased sickness and accidents and we need to have an open and honest debate on the importance of good regulation on health and safety standards, social rights, working conditions and consumer and environmental protections. Just imagine if these standards were not in place! High standards benefit companies too, by increasing productivity and motivation. There is a whole lot of truth in the popular saying that happy workers are good workers.

UNI Europa and GMB are working together to influence the EU debate. We have good contacts with supportive MEPs, and have made inroads in the Commission too. UNI Europa took the initiative to set up the [Better Regulation Watchdog](#) (which GMB supports), knowing that we also have to work with a wider range of civil society and NGO actors. The Watchdog now unites 66 organisations from 18 different

European countries, and is growing. Already, it has had much success and serious influence. Building alliances and working together with one voice will ensure we keep social and employment rights on the EU agenda and safeguard Social Europe.

Many of the laws and regulations on which British workers rely come from the EU, and are therefore locked in, making it difficult for governments like David Cameron’s to unravel them, even though we know they would like to. If the UK leaves the EU, UNI Europa worries that this door will be flung open and your rights will be sucked away. We want to stand shoulder to shoulder with British unions to make sure you benefit from the same employment and social rights as we do.

So, we are better off working together and united to improve the conditions for workers across the EU. At UNI Europa’s Congress in Rome on 14-16 March, we will be campaigning to safeguard and promote Social Europe. We will be courageous and seek new channels of influence, and we will stand our ground, knowing GMB, as always, will be there with us.

## GMB welcomes moves away from corporate dominance of EU groups

GMB has welcomed indications from the European Ombudswoman that the EU Commission is making positive progress in improving the transparency in its 800+ expert groups. The Ombudswoman has stated more needs to be done however to ensure a balanced membership and avoid conflicts of interest. She has also renewed calls for all group members, meeting agendas, minutes and background documents to be made publically

available. This assessment is part of the Ombudswoman’s ongoing inquiry into the groups, launched in May 2014. GMB has raised its concerns over the corporate dominance and lack of transparency in these groups and we are demanding legally-binding EU rules with clear criteria for balanced representation, measures to reduce potential conflicts of interest and more public information on the groups’ work, members and selection procedures.

### Trade unions to join forces against undeclared work

A new European Platform is to be established to tackle undeclared work, with improved cross-border cooperation, including between trade unions. Common measures and tools are to be set up to prevent and deter such work, including best practice exchange and enforcement training. There are an estimated 600,000 undeclared workers in the UK alone, working under precarious conditions with no social security or employment rights, and contributing to unfair competition across the board. Cash-in-hand work accounts for a shocking 10% of Britain’s GDP.

## Workers' rights threatened by sharing economy

Around 5mn people work in the UK's sharing economy, according to a new European [study](#), which has raised concerns about the serious impact of this emerging sector on workers' rights, consumer protection, public health and tax revenues. The organisation of work via online platforms – such as Uber – is growing at a dangerous rate across Europe, and contrary to what many think, is fast becoming the sole source of income for many of these workers.

The EU Commission is due to release guidelines in March on how better to regulate the sharing economy and ensure workers' rights and employer obligations

### Triple A Social Europe

European Socialists have presented their vision for a [Triple A Social Europe](#) – a strong, ambitious and progressive agenda to increase the EU's social dimension, introduce a European statute for workers, more funding for initiatives to tackle youth unemployment, and ensure people's interests are promoted and protected over those of big business.

### GMB-sponsored Bryncethin Youth Rugby team visits Brussels

GMB was delighted to help coordinate a visit to Brussels by young rugby players and their families from Bryncethin, Wales this month. Clad in their GMB logoed shirts, the club combined a fact finding visit to the European Parliament, hosted by Welsh MEPs Derek Vaughan and Jill Evans, with a friendly rugby match (winning 35-7 against Belgian team La Hulpe!). They were given a warm welcome by La Hulpe (special thanks go to co-ordinator Alain Vanderauwera), with great camaraderie between the two teams, showing a real spirit of European solidarity at all ages!

are respected and enforced.

GMB will be closely monitoring developments and demanding an end to precarious working conditions and poor pay.

### EU calls on UK to end housing inequality

In its newly published Country Specific Recommendations for 2016, the EU Commission has urged Britain to take urgent action against a persistent rise in housing prices, which is making the prospect of owning a home increasingly unaffordable for many. Action is also needed against high household debt, low labour productivity and the lack of apprenticeships and other vocational training opportunities. The EU Commission notes that more affordable and available childcare would help mothers return to work, and that more serious investment is needed in key sectors such as transport, energy and digital communications.

GMB is concerned that flexibility in the UK's labour market has been welcomed by the EU Commission, which too often is driving an increase in precarious work, greater inequalities and threatening the quality of jobs and decent wages.



Group organiser and GMB branch president Nigel Evans said: "This trip not only gave our children the chance to play rugby and build good friendships in a different country, it was a great educational trip for both children and adults, and many thanks must go to Mike Wilson for sponsoring our GMB polo tops."

## OTHER NEWS IN BRIEF:

**Ending austerity:** Socialist MEPs have led EU Parliament calls to increase wages and boost investment in order to reduce inequality and strengthen economic recovery. They are demanding the EU Commission put an end once and for all to its damaging policies of cuts and austerity.

**Trade secrets:** MEPs have called for the EU to guarantee strong protections for workers, whistleblowers and journalists who expose corruption and malpractice, and that they do not fall foul of big business trade secret rules.

**Poverty:** Single-parent and large families are disproportionately more at risk of poverty and social exclusion, according to new EuroFound [research](#). The reduction of tax credits and child benefits has had a major negative impact on these families in the UK.

**Endocrine disruptors:** The EU Court of Justice has demanded the EU Commission take immediate action to identify and ban potentially harmful endocrine disruptors – substances that interfere with human hormones and to which we are all exposed on a daily basis through products such as food packaging, clothing, cosmetics and toys.

**Safe gas appliances:** Labour MEPs have voted for new EU laws that would raise safety standards for boilers, gas cookers, ovens, barbecues and patio heaters and prevent fatal gas poisoning and leakage.

**Digital portability:** Draft EU legislation currently being debated could make way for the portability of all digital content (such as BBC iPlayer, Netflix and Spotify) across the EU by 2017, allowing Europeans to access content they have legally purchased or subscribed to when travelling abroad.

**Sustainable public transport:** Labour MEPs have backed EU calls for safer and more sustainable public transport in towns and cities. The UK lags behind many EU countries for urban transport satisfaction, especially in terms of congestion and travel costs.

### WANT TO KNOW MORE?

For further details on any of the items in this issue of the European News, please contact the GMB Brussels office:

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