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General Secretary: Frances O’Grady

TUC briefing for MPs on European Union Referendum Bill 2015

Second reading debate

9 June 2015

EU Referendum Bill: second reading

The TUC is an affiliate of the European Trade Union Confederation [1] which represents 60 million working people belonging to 90 national trade union confederations in 39 countries. Across Europe, trade unions are campaigning for sustainable growth to deliver more and better jobs, skills and fair wages. Decent work must be based on rights for working people to decent treatment, equality and respect at the workplace. We believe these should be the priorities for the European Union, and for any reform agenda.

**Context: Social Europe under attack**

We are particularly concerned that some governments and business leaders – but by no means all – see the current British government renegotiation agenda as an opportunity to strip away workers’ rights; introduce a moratorium on new rights; and scapegoat migrant workers rather than address people’s concerns about unregulated labour markets and insufficient social benefits and public services.

Our polling [2] immediately after the General Election showed that people are less likely to vote for Britain to stay in the European Union if their rights at work are attacked. We are particularly concerned that regulation of working time and temporary agency workers’ rights are under attack, and that agreements between employers and unions are being undermined. The TUC will work with our colleagues in Europe to emphasise the risks involved in compromising over workers’ rights. TUC General Secretary Frances O’Grady wrote an open letter to British business leaders in the *Financial Times* about this issue [3].

We are also conscious that migration will be a key issue in the Referendum debate. Again, TUC polling [4] suggests that while people support managed migration, they do not believe restrictions on freedom of movement will affect the availability of jobs or undercutting of wages: for that, we need stronger regulation of the labour market rather than greater flexibility.

**Franchise**

One of the main issues for debate in the European Union Referendum Bill is the franchise. The TUC generally supports widening the franchise, and doing everything possible to get people to register and then vote (including peers.)

Since 1999, we have supported votes at 16, and as the Scottish referendum showed, 16 and 17 year olds respond positively to the opportunity to engage in political debate and the exercise of democratic rights. Our view is that they are old enough to work and pay income tax, so they are old enough to vote.

The principle of no taxation without representation extends, we believe, to the many European Union citizens who live and have made their homes in the UK. They would be critically affected by the decision about whether the UK should remain a member of the European Union, as would the children being educated in British schools. We do not believe it is satisfactory that Irish people in Britain, Cypriots and Maltese people, and those in Gibraltar should be allowed to vote, but not the other EU citizens who reside and pay tax in the UK.

There is also one area where we would seek clarification. As currently drafted, the Bill suggests that UK residents abroad will only be able to vote if they have been registered in the UK in the past 15 years. However, another Bill was announced in the Queen’s Speech, to extend the franchise generally to those excluded by that arbitrary time limit. The TUC would urge MPs to clarify whether, if that Bill is enacted prior to the referendum, or prior to the passage of the European Union Referendum Bill, would those British citizens covered by the Votes for Life Bill be able to vote in the referendum? The TUC believes they should be able to, regardless, and would support amendments to the European Union Referendum Bill to ensure that.

In summary, we would support extending the franchise for the referendum to cover:

* 16 and 17 year olds;
* EU citizens living in the UK; and
* UK citizens living abroad regardless of how long.

Notes

[1] [www.etuc.org](http://www.etuc.org)

[2] <https://www.tuc.org.uk/international-issues/europe/employment-and-social-policy/be-careful-what-you-wish-tuc-tells-business>

[3] <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/4a8b3f7c-02d0-11e5-b31d-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3cAZxhv9b>

[4] <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/TUCTalkingaboutmigration_0.pdf>