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# European News

May 2016

## Stronger together

*by Georges Dassis, President of the European Economic and Social Committee and representative of the Greek General Confederation of Labour to the ETUC, ITUC and ILO*

In a democracy, it is completely legitimate and appropriate to consult the people, but asking them to make a critical decision without fully explaining the consequences shows little respect for its people. I worry that, whatever the outcome of the EU referendum, it may leave the British people deeply divided at a time when there is insecurity enough.



If the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, there will be only one advantage: the anti-EU populists will lose their main purpose as well as the funding they receive from the European Union that they so love to criticise and make a scapegoat. This will come at great cost, with those who promote hatred and xenophobia continuing their sinister efforts to push a divided Europe into the same dreadful situation as befall countries which the British fought with such courage, honour and glory 75 years ago to free.

Today's political leaders have not lived through war but they cannot turn a blind eye to Europe's history. Particularly not in the United Kingdom, given the pivotal role the country has played and the suffering it endured: it has been the hero and the champion of resistance, freedom, democracy and the fight against extremism, totalitarianism, fascism and racism.

However imperfect it may be, the European Union's primary purpose is to safeguard peace. It is the main architect of the peace that we have enjoyed for over 70 years. This peace is not a given but must be cultivated every day through dialogue and solidarity.

Since it joined the European Community in 1973, the United Kingdom has had a strong – and even disproportionate – influence on the decisions of the European Union. Many from other countries like myself are amazed that the British press and some people in the UK claim that Britain has no power within the EU or ability to influence it – our experience of British influence is very different! By being critical, reticent and sometimes overly prudent, Britain's leaders have more than once prevented the EU from becoming more social or acting in solidarity to improve things for its citizens. However, if the European Union does finally become more social, political and mutually supportive, it will be more attractive to the British people in general and to workers in particular.

History shows us that, ultimately, looking purely to one's own interests often yields a bitter harvest. United we are strong. I and my fellow trade unionists across the EU do not wish to lose you, our friends. Voting to keep the United Kingdom in the European Union is an act of solidarity we hope you will make not only for yourselves, but for all of us and – more importantly – thinking of the future of those who will live in the Britain and Europe of tomorrow: our children.

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**Less than a month to go before the EU Referendum on 23<sup>rd</sup> June!**



**Don't forget to register to vote by 7 June – click [here](#).**

### Trade unions demand end to EU cuts and austerity measures

GMB has joined the ETUC's calls for an immediate end to the EU's misguided policy of cuts and austerity, which has only led to increased inequality and social exclusion in the wake of the financial crisis. Trade unions are calling for more public investments and increased wages for a job-led growth.

## Greeks say: More austerity is not the answer



With its back up against the wall, Greece has once more had to accept a fresh batch of imposed cuts and austerity measures in order to receive more bailout cash from international creditors.

Greece's left-wing Syriza government did however reject creditors' demands for another €120mn-worth of pay cuts, which would have pushed even more workers and their families below the poverty line. Hundreds of people demonstrated outside parliament and trade unions went on a 2-day strike on 6 and 7 May in protest at the new rules, which include reductions to social security benefits and increases to a range of indirect taxes.

### Still feeling the effects of the crisis

A new [study](#) has revealed the failure of cuts and austerity measures to protect workers from job insecurity, underemployment, stagnant wages and poverty pay in post-crisis Europe.

According to a recent Eurobarometer [poll](#), more than half of young Europeans aged 16-30 (53% in the UK) feel marginalised at home but unable or unwilling to move abroad to find work.

And the ILO has [revealed](#) that a growing number of Europeans are now living in "relative poverty", with a lack of quality jobs threatening to turn back the clock on decades of social progress.

### Tackling undeclared work

The European Platform against undeclared work was launched on 27 May, bringing together national and European politicians, labour inspectors and social partners. The platform will boost cooperation and best practice sharing to end the exploitation of workers and all forms of undeclared work, which leads to unfair competition and a race to the bottom. It will also look at how best to increase resources for labour inspectors.

### Fair Transport Europe



The European Transport Workers Federation has launched a European Citizens' Initiative demanding new EU rules to improve working conditions for European transport workers.

Sign the petition [here](#).

### Protecting workers from harmful chemicals

The EU Commission has announced new measures to protect workers against cancer-causing chemicals, introducing legal workplace exposure limits for 13 more substances in the EU Carcinogens and Mutagens Directive. This is a "significant step forward" and a "hard-won victory for workers and their trade unions," said the ETUC, which is demanding exposure limits for at least 15 more substances. Exposure limits still do not replace employers' obligations to eliminate and substitute toxic substances in the workplace however, warned the ETUC.

## EU Trade Union Action Update

**Italy:** Trade unions have denounced the rapid spread of **payment vouchers** which do not allow workers to accrue any leave allowance, sick pay or redundancy benefits when the employment ends. **Italcementi cement** workers are due to go on strike over hundreds of planned dismissals following a major stake acquisition by **Heidelberg Cement**. Public and private **waste** workers have also planned industrial action to defend their collective agreement, stop job and pay cuts and ensure public procurement is used to deliver quality services and improve health and safety.

**France:** **Rail workers** have gone on their third strike in two months over pay, working conditions and planned reductions in rest periods.

**Germany:** Over 100,000 **metal** and **electrical** workers staged walkouts in protest at poor wage increase offers from employers – rejected by the **IG Metall** trade union. **IG Metall** has also demanded job protection in the event of a **Thyssenkrupp-Tata Steel** merger.

**Poland:** The **Solidarność** trade union has negotiated a collective agreement for Gdansk **dockworkers**, bringing to an end a bitter three-year dispute which included the harassment of workers and dismissal of union leaders.

**Portugal:** **Taxi** drivers organised a nationwide strike against **Uber**, **dockworkers** went on strike to demand a new collective agreement, and **labour inspectors** took industrial action in protest at the serious deterioration of working conditions.

**Romania:** **Miners** and **energy** workers have marched on the capital to demand urgent solutions to the ailing state energy sector and for 800 mining jobs to be saved.

**Slovenia:** Following strike action, the **energy** sector trade union has secured a government agreement that any planned restructuring of the industry will be subject to social dialogue.

**Hungary:** **Social service** workers have gone on strike over poor pay (35% below the national average) and unhealthy working time arrangements, following two and a half years of fruitless negotiations.

**Austria:** Thousands of workers have not been compensated for about 52mn hours of overtime in 2015, equivalent to around 30,000 fulltime jobs, according to new research.

 **IndustriAll:** The global trade union federation **IndustriAll** has signed a unique agreement to monitor and reinforce workers' rights in the supply chain of the world's largest fashion retailer, **Inditex**.

## Bury TTIP and other toxic trade deals, demands GMB

GMB is calling on the EU Commission to bury the EU-US **TTIP** trade deal once and for all. Further negotiating documents [leaked](#) this month have revealed the privileged role corporate investors will be given in the deal and that they have been actively working with negotiators to undermine key EU health and environmental protection laws. GMB has consistently opposed the toxic deal, which threatens to weaken vital labour and environmental regulations and could lead to the privatisation of key public services like education, transport and the NHS. Negotiations have so far been carried out in almost complete secrecy and the latest revelations show just how right we were to be concerned. "TTIP must be completely abandoned and buried in the landfill of history with CETA (EU-Canada trade deal), TiSA (global Trade in Services Agreement) and all the other poisonous agreements," said GMB's International Officer.

Many European citizens share our concerns, and the **CETA** deal – which after years of delays is expected to be fully ratified by the end of the year –

has hit another major stumbling block, with both the Dutch and Belgian regional Walloon parliaments saying they will refuse to endorse the deal.



The ETUC and Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) have issued a [joint statement](#) outlining the many substantial changes that would need to be made to CETA for European and Canadian trade unions to even consider not rejecting the corporate-driven deal. GMB is working with them to get the deal rejected.

The European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) has published a [paper](#) on the potential harmful impact of CETA, TTIP and other trade agreements on healthcare and social services.

## Save Our Steel, David Cameron!

GMB members marched across London on 25 May in protest at the UK government's failure to stop the steel industry crisis, and demanding a long-term strategy to support the sector and safeguard vital jobs.

Labour and fellow Socialist MEPs were instrumental in leading an EU Parliament vote this month opposing Market Economy Status (MES) for China, which would open up the European market to even greater dumping of cheap Chinese products and further decimate Europe's home-grown industries such as steel. "We will not accept any measures that weaken our ability to defend ourselves from unfair Chinese competition," said **Labour MEP David Martin**. "The more China dumps steel onto the market, the more Europe's jobs and industry are threatened. We must act now or soon there won't be any EU

industry left to defend," he added. The ETUC has signed a [joint statement](#) with its American (AFL-CIO) and Canadian (CLC) counterparts opposing MES for China.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development has warned that urgent action must be taken to tackle the "worst steel crisis since the early 1980s". More than 5,000 jobs have been lost in the industry since last autumn alone.

GMB is urging David Cameron immediately to relaunch discussions in the EU Council on updating and improving the EU's trade defence instruments – blocked by Cameron for the past two years.

GMB has also welcomed the EU Commission's adoption of a new prior-surveillance system and obligatory import license for steel products coming into the EU.

## GMB puts EU spotlight on dangers of zero hours

GMB's European Officer has had an opinion adopted in the EU Economic and Social Committee putting a spotlight on the need to address the challenges of new forms of employment relationships and contracts such as zero hours and other on-demand work forms, as well as on-line platforms, crowdsourcing, and other related work generated by the development of digitalisation, and addressing grey areas or gaps in rights and protections.

The opinion offers an overview of these key trends and their impact on living wages, social security systems, tax systems, achieving a work/life balance and security of income, health and safety, employment rights and status, and access to training and upskilling. It highlights the importance of protecting the quality and financial sustainability of social protection systems, ensuring participation and protections for all workers, and that this needs to be given consideration in the development of the EU Pillar of Social Rights.

Clarification of the legal status of new labour market intermediaries such as on-line platforms is required, as well as establishing which standards, obligations and liabilities, health and safety and rules of operation apply. Labour inspectorates should be ensured a role to cover these employment forms and the resources, competences and training to deal with them. The impact on collective bargaining coverage also needs to be analysed and anomalies that put workers in dependent self-employment outside of bargaining structures and risk them being considered cartels under competition law must be addressed. Effective rights and protections should be put in place to avoid widening income inequalities and reduction of disposable incomes which could have a negative effect on EU economic growth.

## EU takes action on tax justice

Members of the European Parliament have backed EU law proposals that will enforce greater corporate tax transparency and promote tougher action on tax dodging and aggressive tax planning by fat cat multinationals desperate to avoid paying their fair share. EU finance ministers, however, have failed to agree these new rules, with Ireland and Luxembourg – countries known to offer special corporate tax breaks – amongst the most critical. The ministers did however agree to draw up a list of common tax havens by next year.

Over 300 of the world's leading economists, including France's Thomas Piketty, have signed an [open letter](#) to world leaders stating that tax havens "serve no economic purpose" and only "distort the working of the global economy".

Meanwhile, European trade unions

and civil society organisations have published a [joint letter](#) demanding that the ten committed EU countries keep their promise and agree an ambitious and historic EU financial transaction tax (FTT) when their heads of state meet next month. A European 'Robin Hood' tax could generate billions in revenues and provide much needed funding for public services and infrastructure.

Sign the [petition](#) to demand an EU-wide FTT.

### We need posted workers reforms now

A third of EU Member States, the majority from Central and Eastern Europe, have demanded that the EU Commission scrap its proposed reforms of the EU Posted Workers Directive, triggering a so-called 'yellow card' mechanism and forcing the EU Commission to provide a detailed response as to why it thinks the reforms should go ahead. GMB has long called for the Directive to be fully revised and loopholes within it closed, and has joined the [ETUC](#) in calling on the Commission to reject the yellow card demand and proceed with the intended reforms as soon as possible. These include strict enforcement of the fundamental principle of equal pay for equal work in the same place and consistent with collective agreements – something the Central and Eastern European posted workers would greatly benefit from but that their governments argue would reduce the countries' competitive advantage.

### Saying goodbye to mobile roaming charges

Mobile roaming charges within the EU were slashed even further this month. From now on, your mobile phone operator will only be able to charge you a small additional amount on top of domestic prices when you travel to another EU country. EU roaming charges will be abolished altogether in June 2017.

## OTHER NEWS IN BRIEF:

**Rights for carers:** MEPs have called for new EU-wide rights, including to remuneration and minimum social protection standards, for those caring for a family member.

**Part-time work:** An increasing number of people across Europe (a third of them women) work part-time, according to a new [study](#), which highlights the dangers of this trend if the hours are involuntary, often leading to a loss of earnings and poorer working conditions.

**LGBTI rights:** Socialist MEPs have adopted a [position paper](#) calling for more EU action to promote and uphold LGBTI rights across Europe and around the world, stating that "equal rights are not a negotiable principle".

**Food labels:** MEPs have called for mandatory country of origin labels to be extended to all processed food and dairy products, so that consumers will always know where their food comes from and can make informed choices about what they eat.

**Trafficking:** EU Member States must step up their cooperation to put an end to human trafficking, of which 80% of victims are women, MEPs have demanded.

**No smoking:** Stricter EU rules were introduced this month to make smoking and cigarettes less attractive, especially for young people. More than one in four Europeans smokes, and half will die prematurely, with a reduced life expectancy of 14 years on average. The EU Ombudswoman has criticised the EU Commission for refusing to tackle the massive and influential tobacco industry lobby.

**Europol:** Labour MEPs have voted to strengthen the EU police agency Europol, enhancing cooperation amongst EU law enforcement authorities and contributing to the fight against cross-border crime and terrorism. The new rules also include strong data protection safeguards and democratic oversight tools.

## 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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### Ban Glyphosate!

EU national ministers are to meet again next month to decide whether to renew glyphosate's European license for 2 more years, pending a full safety assessment by the European Chemicals agency due next year.



The EU Commission had previously proposed to renew the world's most common weed-killer's license for another 10 years but couldn't find a majority of Member States to back its position. There have been severe health warnings of glyphosate's links to cancer.

GMB has been campaigning for an outright ban on the use of glyphosate worldwide, and wrote to the Tory MPs who sit on the glyphosate EU license decision panel urging them not to agree to the dangerous substance's re-authorisation. A copy of GMB's letter is available on our [website](#).

Want to find out more? Read this [article](#) by the International Union of Foodworkers' Peter Rossman.