

## UK Trade Unions come out against Brexit

**Steve Coulter of the London School of Economics** welcomes publication of a letter by major UK trade unions in favour of remaining in the EU. Otherwise, the Referendum campaign risks being dominated by Conservative politicians slinging mud at each other

What do British trade unions think about Brexit? Up until now, the Referendum campaign in the UK has been dominated by the unedifying spectacle of Conservative politicians tearing into each other. David Cameron and his Chancellor, George Osborne, on the Remain side have pitted themselves against former London Mayor Boris Johnson, who argues for Brexit. The campaign has quickly descended into mud-slinging and acrimony, spiced with dodgy statistics and conspiracy theories on both sides.

Not surprisingly, much of the Left has opted to stay above this catfight. But some fear this has hardened into indecision and a lack of commitment. The Labour Party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, only recently affirmed his support for the EU. Allies say he had been reluctant to share a platform with pro-Remain Conservatives, but there are suspicions that Corbyn is anti-EU anyway and was forced into officially opposing Brexit by his colleagues. There has also been some ambivalence among trade unions, with the RMT transport workers union in favour of leaving the EU and a number of others vocally critical about the pro-market direction the EU has allegedly taken in recent years.

Now, a group of major trade unions have joined forces to emphasise the dangers of Brexit for jobs and working conditions. Union leaders still have reservations about the direction of travel of the EU, but they like the prospect of life outside it a lot less.

Many see in the Brexit camp a division between nativist, UK Independence Party supporters itching to restrict immigration, and a more liberal-minded faction seeking free trade deals with the US and emerging economies. They worry that, unpleasant though the former may be, the latter camp drawn from Conservative rebels could dominate post-Brexit negotiations and see in them an opportunity to tear up employment protection in order to turn the UK into an even more flexible, low-wage economy than it already is.

The letter, printed in full below, was published in the Guardian newspaper and makes clear what is at stake for UK unions:

*'As general secretaries who represent a large part of Britain's trade union movement, we are writing to make our position clear and urge our collective membership, which reaches over 6 million people, to vote for Britain to remain in the European Union on 23 June.*

*After much debate and deliberation we believe that the social and cultural benefits of remaining in the EU far outweigh any advantages of leaving.*

*Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s the British trade union movement worked in solidarity with our European partners and fought hard to secure valuable working rights legislation at EU level. To this day these rights – including maternity and paternity rights, equal treatment for full-time, part-time and agency workers, and the right to paid leave – continue to underpin and protect working rights for British people.*

*If Britain leaves the EU, we are in no doubt these protections would be under great threat. Despite words to the contrary from figures like Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Gove, the Tories would negotiate our exit and, we believe, would negotiate away our rights. We simply do not trust this*



*government if they are presented with an unrestricted, unchecked opportunity to attack our current working rights.*

*Europe needs to change – its political direction over the past few years has taken governments down a path of austerity and liberalisation – but we believe this direction is not irreversible, and will endeavour to work with our trade union colleagues to help shape a Europe with a renewed social agenda and a Europe that values investment in our public services.*

*The decision the British people must make on 23 June should not be taken lightly, but we urge our members to vote remain.'*

Len McCluskey, Unite  
Dave Prentis, Unison  
Tim Roache, GMB  
Manuel Cortes, TSSA  
John Smith, Musicians' Union  
Dave Ward, CWU  
Matt Wrack, FBU  
John Hannett, USDAW  
Gerry Robinson, Bectu  
Roy Rickhuss, Community

This letter first appeared in [The Guardian](#), 6 June 2016.

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