

THE FIRE BRIGADES UNION CONFERENCE 2016

EXECUTIVE COUNCIL POLICY STATEMENT

EUROPEAN UNION REFERENDUM – VOTE TO REMAIN



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The UK government will hold a referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union (EU) on 23 June 2016. The question on the ballot paper in the referendum is: 'Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?'

WHY TAKE A POSITION?

Most of the current debate involves one set of pro-business politicians who believe that workers can best be exploited outside the EU versus other pro-business politicians who believe that workers can best be exploited inside the EU.

The labour movement in Britain and across Europe should not line up with either of these factions. Both represent the interests of the big banks, corporations and billionaires. Both involve further attacks on workers' employment rights, public services, wages and pensions.

However decades of integration in the EU, involving both labour and capital across Europe, means that trade unions cannot be indifferent to the outcome of UK withdrawal from the EU. This is a matter of direct interest to all FBU members and one where members have a vote.

After careful consideration, the executive council believes the union should take a position in the EU referendum.

NO ALLIANCE WITH THE HEDGE FUNDS, BANKS AND CORPORATIONS

Firefighters face the same challenges as other workers so the main criterion for trade unions like the FBU is to ask what is in the best interests of FBU members and of other workers in the UK and across Europe.

Whatever stance the FBU takes in the referendum, it is clear that cross-party campaigns to stay (such as 'Britain Stronger in Europe') and to leave (such as 'Vote Leave', 'Grassroots Out' and 'leave.eu') involve big business interests and Tory MPs (and worse). These campaigns are largely focussed on the needs and demands of big business, from where much of their funding comes.

FBU officials cannot jointly campaign with such people, who on every other issue are attacking our members and other workers. This was one of the lessons from the Scottish referendum in 2014. The union has raised this concern, with some success, in the TUC and elsewhere in the labour movement. We should support an independent labour movement approach, which considers the issues from the point of view of workers.

The FBU's decision is informed by important principles:

- Workers' rights
- Democracy
- Defence of jobs and living standards
- Opposition to racism and fascism
- Internationalism

The EU works to promote capital and its interests, but so does the British state. The history of the past thirty five years demonstrates that it has been a succession of UK governments that have pushed most firmly within Europe for neo-liberal policies and agreements, for example those pushing further privatisation.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF BREXIT

There is no agreement among advocates of Brexit about how the UK would function in relation to Europe and the world economy if the majority vote to leave the EU.

- One model that is not on offer in this referendum is a progressive left departure, sometimes called 'Lexit'. Both sides in the current debate are led by Tory politicians; those driving the exit campaign are among the most anti-trade union, anti-working class forces in British politics.
- The EU is by far the UK's biggest trading partner, accounting for 45% of UK goods and services exports and 50% of imports. The UK's next biggest trading partner is the US. The UK is the EU's top destination for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), getting one in five projects in recent years. The risk and uncertainty resulting from leaving is bound to have economic effects, which workers will be expected to pay for.
- This has been a major factor in the consideration of other unions, particularly those with significant interests in manufacturing and has been a key reason why such unions have so far supported a 'remain' position.
- If the UK leaves the EU, it is highly likely to mean very rapidly a huge attack on workers' conditions, employment rights and working class living standards, as the British government introduces more 'flexibility' and deregulation as it signs bilateral trade deals and tries to compete on its own in the global economy.
- Leaving will also help a range of Tory and far-right populists into power at Westminster, further pushing British politics away from progressive policies and public services. It will benefit the far right and the racists in Britain and across the continent. It will make European-wide workers' solidarity and workers' unity much harder.
- A central demand of those leading the main 'leave' campaigns is to reduce or scrap many of the worker protections which rely on EU legislation and regulation – such as those on working hours, equal pay and health and safety. A UK exit would inevitably lead to an immediate attack on such rights, for example on the limitations on the working hours introduced under the European Working Time Directive.
- These areas are of particular concern within the fire and rescue service. Firefighters are well aware, for example, of the pressure to increase working hours within our service. EU withdrawal and the subsequent scrapping of working time protection would strengthen these attacks on our members' conditions.
- Withdrawal would almost certainly result in other steps which would lead to the break-up of the UK, with the Scottish government demanding a further independence referendum in order to remain in the EU. It would also have huge implications for the peace process in Northern Ireland and the border with the Republic of Ireland.

THE CASE TO REMAIN

The EU has mostly been about promoting business, but it has also had to make concessions on various aspects of social policy at various times. This has frequently been done for the benefit of businesses by ensuring that social policies (for example on working time, paid leave etc.) ensure 'fair' competition between firms operating in different EU countries. Nevertheless, these measures have produced tangible gains for workers in the UK and across the rest of

Europe. It is clear that such gains would be under a clear and immediate threat following a UK exit from the EU.

These factors have been central to the debate in much of the labour movement. The TUC and the bulk of the British labour movement have raised warnings about the threats to jobs and to workers' rights from leaving the EU. Likewise most of the Labour Party, including Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell are advocating a 'remain' position, while calling for a major campaign to re-shape the EU in favour of workers and against austerity.

They argue that millions of jobs in the UK depend on trade with the rest of the EU. That affects whole industries and the taxes workers and firms pay, which help fund decent public services. EU law provides the floor that our trade union collective agreements build on. This includes protection like paid holidays, family friendly rights, consultation on redundancies, and health and safety laws.

Firefighters benefit from these laws, particularly in areas of working time and safety. Retained firefighters have won gains as part-time workers in the EU. The FBU and other UK trade unions benefit from European law in defending our right to organise and take legal cases on behalf of members.

A vote to remain should not be taken as an endorsement of the current EU, but recognition that the organised labour movement is not currently in a position to replace it with something better. A vote to remain does not mean the union supports the way business and its friends have crafted European unity, nor does it mean we support the way they mould their project.

The labour movement in the UK must resist the neoliberal policies of the EU, should prioritise direct links with workers and trade unions across borders and fight on the European terrain and campaign for consistent democracy in the EU. A campaign to remain must be an independent, labour movement based campaign that does not share campaign platforms or fall in behind the business-led campaigns.

RECOMMENDATION

The executive council recommends that conference adopts the following approach to the EU referendum:

1. In or out of the EU, workers in the UK and elsewhere in Europe face attacks on living standards, public services and workers' rights as the drive for austerity continues in the UK and across Europe.

- We support all steps towards a united, Europe-wide workers' campaign to demand levelling up workers' rights, employment protection and health and safety provision.
- We support a fight for full domestic trade union rates of pay for all workers within any EU country and for the scrapping of any EU regulations which obstruct such aims.

2. The workers' movement in the UK and elsewhere should have no trust or confidence in the current politicians who lead EU institutions or in the undemocratic and bureaucratic systems by which much decision making is carried out.

- We support a Europe-wide campaign for full democratic control over EU institutions, including the European Central Bank.

- We will support campaigns to end the secrecy surrounding discussions of the Eurogroup of finance ministers and negotiations around TTIP or other trade deals.
- We support building a Europe-wide workers' campaign for democracy and against austerity.

3. Withdrawal from the EU would be a victory for some of the most right wing and anti-trade union politicians in the UK. It would also be likely to rapidly lead to the scrapping of workers' protection measures introduced under EU law (on working time, on health and safety, on paid parental leave, on part-time workers' rights etc).

- We conclude on balance that workers' in the UK, including FBU members, should be urged to vote to remain in the EU in the referendum on 23 June 2016.