



from **Glenis Willmott MEP**

MEP for the East Midlands and Labour's Leader in Europe

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Union Matters covers European employment and social policy and other topics of interest to Trade Unionists.

Please feel free to circulate it to interested individuals, Trade Union branches and organisations.

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About Glenis

Always an active Trade Unionist, Glenis worked as a medical scientist for the NHS before becoming a full-time Trade Union officer. She worked for the GMB for 16 years, becoming senior organiser in 1995, and was Secretary of the East Midlands Trade Union and Labour Party Liaison Committee.

Glenis became a Member of the European Parliament for the East Midlands in 2006, and was re-elected in 2009. She was elected leader of the European Parliamentary Labour Party in 2009.

Cameron launches attack on European workers' rights

The Prime Minister has said that he intends to "repatriate" the European Union's powers to set minimum standards for workers - which include the right to paid holiday and the right to be consulted

In an attempt to appease backbench Conservative MPs after their revolt over Europe in the House of Commons, the Conservative-led Government has redoubled its attack on European workers' rights.

Many of our basic rights at work are guaranteed by European laws, setting common minimum standards across Europe. Labour MEPs have fought hard for these standards, which include the right to four weeks' paid holiday; the right to rest time between shifts; guarantees on health and safety in the workplace; and a right for workers to be consulted on major changes – amongst many others.

Now, the Conservative-led Government has declared its intention to take the UK out of these minimum standards. Education Secretary Michael Gove, a key Cameron ally, [says](#) that the rules "affect our capacity to grow" and "actually hold us back."

David Cameron has chosen to portray the move as an issue of national sovereignty, rather than an attack on workers. He [told MPs](#) simply that employment law "would be better dealt with at the national level," without detailing how he would use the powers.



The Prime Minister is using the language of national sovereignty to justify an old-fashioned attack on workers' rights

However, the move is just the latest in a string of assaults on basic working rights. It comes after proposals to make it [easier](#) for employers to sack workers and harder for workers to take their employers to tribunal. It also follows a hastily withdrawn proposal from Chancellor George Osborne to [cut maternity leave](#) rights.

David Cameron's call to repatriate powers from the EU is a smokescreen for a further onslaught on our working conditions. We must continue to get the message across that these attacks are no substitute for a real plan to invest in growth and jobs. ■

Labour MEPs support Remploy workers

Labour MEPs have lent their full support to Remploy workers campaigning against the closure of their factories, which could make up to 4,000 workers redundant.

A report for the Government, written by Liz Sayce, has called for public funding for the sites to be cut, meaning the factories would close their doors.

Although the Government promised a full consultation, only a small fraction of the workforce have been invited to its consultation events, with no possibility for workers to ask their Trade Union representatives to attend.

In the East Midlands, despite the existence of four Remploy sites, no consultation events were held. Workers had to travel up to 80 miles to attend their nearest consultation.

Glenis Willmott has [raised her concerns](#) about the poor consultation exercise with the Government Minister responsible, and asked the Government to think again.

For thousands of disabled workers, the Remploy sites are irreplaceable – not only as a workplace, but as a place to receive support and as a centre of the community. This could simply not be found in mainstream employment.

The Government must listen to Remploy workers and realise what a huge loss the closure of the factories would be. ■

Robin Hood Tax: one step closer to becoming a reality

The European Commission has announced its proposal to create a Europe-wide Financial Transaction Tax, despite opposition from the UK's Conservative-led Government

The European Commission has [launched](#) its formal proposal for a Financial Transaction Tax across Europe, a vital step towards the tax becoming a reality.

The move followed extensive campaigning by Trade Unions, charities and the [Robin Hood Tax campaign](#), supported by Labour MEPs and their colleagues in the Parliament's Socialist group.

A very small tax on financial transactions – of between 0.01% and

0.1% – would raise billions of pounds in revenue, which could be used to support public services and rebalance the burden of taxation away from ordinary working people.

It would also bring greater stability to financial markets, by reducing the volume of risky trades in the sector.

The proposal is supported by the French and German governments, but is opposed by the Conservatives in the UK. However, the support of all governments in the EU, including the UK's, will be needed for the new law to be passed.

Labour's spokesperson in Europe on economic affairs, Arlene McCarthy MEP, [said](#), "The proposals can't be pushed through without British agreement, so let's engage in the process and try to find a way in which the financial sector can pay its fair share towards the cost of the economic crisis." ■



Glenis Willmott MEP supports the Robin Hood Tax campaign at the European Parliament

"New skills and jobs" for European workers

The European Commission launched its [Agenda for new skills and jobs](#) last year, in a bid to raise levels of employment in the EU and contribute to the EU's growth strategy, *Europe 2020*. The European Parliament debated the strategy in Strasbourg in October.

The Agenda sets a target of 75% of men and women in Europe to be in employment by 2020. Currently, 23 million Europeans are unemployed. The Agenda, promoted by European

Employment Commissioner László Andor, stresses the need for more "flexicurity" in labour markets.

[Socialist MEPs believe](#) economic growth must be based on inclusive labour markets, and "flexibility" must be accompanied by strong social protection systems. They therefore oppose aspects of the agenda, including certain proposals which would weaken collective bargaining and reduce unemployment benefits. ■

Ban on blacklisting opposed by liberal and centre-right MEPs

Labour MEPs continue to support the campaign for an end to blacklisting, after Liberal and centre-right MEPs opposed a ban

A proposal in the European Parliament to call for a ban on 'blacklisting' of workers failed in Strasbourg this month, when the Liberal group of MEPs decided to vote with right-wing groups against the proposal.

The proposal, put forward by Glenis Willmott in the Parliament's Environment and Public Health Committee, called on the European Commission to make blacklisting illegal through a change in EU law.

The issue of blacklisting was brought to Glenis by East Midlands constituent Brian Higgins and by the Blacklisting Support Group, who campaign against the practice.

After being blacklisted by a former employer and subsequently refused employment, Brian has like too many others been unable to work in his trade.

The problem is currently being debated in the European Parliament as it reviews the EU's Health and Safety strategy.



Blacklisting, whereby workers are refused employment for being involved in union activities, is a particular problem in the construction sector

EU Health and Safety law already provides some protection for whistleblowers and Union activists, but there is a clear need to improve this. MEPs have said that in order to improve workplace conditions, workers and their representatives must be involved.

Efforts by Labour MEPs continue. The issue will next be debated in the Parliament's Employment Committee, where Labour MEP Stephen Hughes is to put forward a new proposal. The battle to ban blacklisting is far from over. ■

Posted Workers and Working Time laws to be revisited

Two important EU laws are expected to be revised in the coming months.

The Working Time Directive (WTD) provides guarantees for workers on paid holidays, rests between shifts and maximum working hours during the week, amongst other areas. Labour MEPs, along with the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), believe these are fundamental to guaranteeing the health, safety and dignity of workers. The European Commission is

consulting on a revision of the Directive and a decision is expected by February.

The Posting of Workers Directive is a controversial law governing workers posted from one EU member state to work in another. Labour MEPs and Trade Unions have called for improvements to the Directive to ensure that free movement of workers does not come at the expense of working rights. A revision of the law is expected in the new year. ■

New rights for victims of crime

A new package put forward by the European Commission aims to give new rights to victims of crime, as well as the families of victims of crime.

The proposed new rights include the right to be heard, the right to access victim support services, and the right to notification on release of the perpetrator of the crime from custody.

National governments are also given new responsibilities to provide information to the victim on their rights and how they can exercise them.

Since the new rights will apply across the EU, including in the case of victims who are outside their home country, they also include the right to translation and interpretation during the legal process.

The package has been welcomed by MEPs from across the political spectrum, as well as from national governments.

However, Socialist MEPs on the Parliament's Civil Liberties Committee say that there should be a wider definition of "vulnerable" victims to ensure support is available for all who need it.

Meanwhile, Conservative MEPs and the UK Government question the cost of some of the proposed new rights for victims.

In addition, Trade Union representatives on the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) say the new legislation should include specific measures to protect victims of crime in the workplace. ■



Public contracts in Europe

The European Commission is about to propose new European rules for national governments on awarding public contracts. But will these new rules prevent a repeat of the disastrous Thameslink decision?

In its session in Strasbourg in October, the European Parliament called on the Commission to overhaul the EU's legislation on public procurement, which determines how national governments award public contracts.

This comes soon after the Government's disastrous decision on the Thameslink contract earlier this summer. Thameslink was awarded to Siemens, rather than to Bombardier in Derby, which could cost up to 1,400 jobs directly and many thousands more indirectly in the East Midlands.

The Government made the decision on the basis of the lowest cost, without taking into account important social and economic factors.

Ignoring calls from Unions and the local community, the Government has refused to start a new procurement process, with better criteria.

In response to an urgent Parliamentary Question from Glenis Willmott, the European Commission confirmed that going back to scratch with the procurement process would have been entirely permissible under existing EU rules.

Now, the European Parliament has called on the European Commission to change the law, so that the "lowest-cost only" option is no longer the norm.

Provisions put forward by Labour MEPs and their colleagues in Parliament's Socialist group say that social and economic criteria should be taken into account in every case – such as the need for high-quality jobs, or the need for environmental sustainability.



MEPs say that contracts like Thameslink should not be awarded on a "lowest-cost only" basis. Wider social and economic criteria must be considered

A network of Trade Unions and other campaigning groups has also been set up to call for improvements in the law to allow more social and sustainable public procurement.

Improved rules like these will prevent a repeat of the Thameslink decision.

However, this does not let the Government 'off the hook.' Even under the existing procurement rules, the Government could have considered some social criteria, but failed to do so.

Glenis Willmott welcomed Parliament's calls for new legislation, but said that the European Commission was failing to ensure that governments made use of the existing rules. She said, "New legislation alone is not enough. The European Commission must make public authorities aware of the full extent of what they can do under EU legislation."

The European Commission is expected to bring forward a proposal for a new law by the end of 2011. Labour MEPs will be monitoring this closely. A repeat of the Thameslink decision must not be allowed. ■

Key Facts

What are the EU's current rules on procurement?

The EU's rules on public procurement ensure that UK companies can bid for public contracts across Europe, without discrimination by other European governments.

Under the existing rules, contracts can be awarded in one of two ways. One is the '**lowest-cost only**' basis, whereby only the cost of the goods or services is taken into account.

The other is the '**most economically advantageous tender**' (or 'MEAT') basis, whereby further social and economic criteria are considered in awarding the contract.

According to the European Commission, around 70% of public contracts in Europe are awarded on a MEAT basis.

However, MEAT criteria do not allow a government to discriminate against EU firms from outside their own country. This means the UK government must treat all firms from within the EU equally. ■



Glenis Willmott addresses the European Parliament on Thameslink in October