



Debate pack for GMB members and activists

We've had activists, officers and members get in touch to ask for hints, tips and policy positions when debating about the EU referendum. In this debate pack you'll find easy to digest points and rebuttals to some of the most commonly heard positions on referendum platforms up and down the country.



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Tips when you're debating the issues

Prepare – before you head into your debate, think what questions might come up and what points you want to make. You'll never be able to address every issue in detail, but you can think about answers to the big questions.

Think about the audience – what sort of audience are you speaking to? A trade union audience might need a slightly different pitch to a sixth form college.

Who are you debating with? – debating with a trade unionist will be different from debating with someone from the business community so you'll need to plan your arguments accordingly.

Don't pretend to be an expert – if you don't know something, say so. Don't tie yourself in knots trying to explain the intricacies of European law.

Stick to our turf – we know about rights at work, that's what we want to talk about. We might address other issues but we can be very clear when we agree to speak that we're about workers' right first and foremost.

Taking on the big arguments

Our campaign is about being honest with GMB members about our membership of the EU. That's why we've taken the position in favour of an 'angry remain'. We know the EU isn't perfect, but we also know that so many of the rights at work we depend on every day – or when something goes wrong in the workplace – are guaranteed by EU law. That means our hard fought rights are protected from a full-on attack by the Tory government.

But, we know that some trade unionists are voting to leave the EU. Sometimes we end up debating what a worker's EU should look like with them. So here are some of the issues that come up time and again when trade unionists debate the issue.

Employment rights

Some people say:

“The Tories won’t take away all the social and employment rights we gained from the EU”

1 We’re not saying our hard won rights will disappear overnight, but we’d rather not take that chance. The Trade Union Act shows us exactly what the Tories think of trade unions (and to be clear, the Trade Union Act is entirely the doing of this Tory government, EU laws prevented them from going as far as they might have done otherwise). Recently, Michael Gove said that “membership of the EU prevents us being able to change huge swathes of law” – those laws he’s referring to are the laws that protect us at work.

2 We firmly believe that the Tories would have happily sold our rights down the river as part of their re-negotiations on our membership of the EU – action from British and EU trade unions and MEPs stopped this.

3 Some Tories give warm words in the lead up to the referendum, but we simply don’t trust them. They’ll say anything to get the right result and save David Cameron’s skin.

4 The Tories never liked the rights we won for working people in Europe. Iain Duncan Smith said recently that workers’ rights should be ‘flexible’ after Brexit, this from the man who voted against the EU social chapter in 1992, voted against the Working Time Directive in 1996 and the minimum wage in 1997. Should we trust his Party to preserve our rights after Brexit?

Some people say:

“As trade unionists we should be able to fight for our rights here in the UK, we can get better protections than if we’re in the EU.”

Firstly, we fought for the protections we have from the EU because we were being stripped of employment and trade union rights by Thatcher and Major. Why would we give them up in favour of putting ourselves at the mercy of the Tories now?

Secondly, there are rights guaranteed by the EU that successive UK governments didn’t want to give us. Of course we keep fighting, things aren’t perfect, but if we look at agency workers for example, we can see where the EU forced the hand of UK governments.

UK governments (both Labour and Tory) refused to implement agency workers protections from Europe. When they had to, the UK government opted only to give those equal treatment rights after 12 weeks of employment, but at an EU level the policy is equal rights from day one. The EU has gone further to protect agency workers from exploitation than any UK government to date. We’ll keep fighting for more, but we owe it to our members to protect the rights we already have too.



EU Tories leading the charge against our rights ... and failing

The Tories are leading the push at EU level for the so called ‘better regulation agenda’. For that, read deregulation. The Tory aim here is for the watering down of key employment rights such as health and safety, TUPE, collective redundancy rights, and information and consultation rights because they’re ‘red tape’. Despite their efforts, the EU has found that we do need these regulations to protect working people. Do you think such a review by a UK Tory government would conclude the same thing?

We don’t.

Tory MEP Martin Callanan gave the game away in calling for the Working Time Directive, the Agency Workers’ Directive, the Pregnant Workers’ Directive “and the other barriers to actually employing people” to be scrapped.

‘Miss, Miss, it wasn’t me, it was the EU that did it’ – or was it?

Privatisation of our NHS

This is Westminster government Tory policy. Not only that, we’re egging on other countries to do the same. Our health system is already far more open to commercial control than most other EU health systems, and the Tories have encouraged US and other investment on a large scale.

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Health and safety

Some people say:

“There are still too many accidents at work, so that proves the EU has failed.”

Well, we agree there are too many accidents at work; this is at the very crux of what we do and what we have fought for as trade unionists. But let's look at some figures.

Much of the health & safety law in the UK is now underpinned by the EU. Almost two-thirds of new British health & safety regulations introduced between 1997-2009 originated from the EU (according to the TUC).

In 1992 there were 368 worker fatalities in Britain; this dropped to 142 last year. That's a big reduction.

Deaths occur because employers fail to implement these rules effectively, and we as trade unions are there to make sure that they do.

Exploitation of workers, migrant labour and free movement

As GMB members and activists, we care deeply about this issue. It's a shame to see it being used as a political football.

We know that unscrupulous employers seek to use migrant workers to drive down pay, terms and conditions. The fact is that employers trying to make a quick buck will always try to do that. We need more and better protections for all workers, no matter where they are from.

Some people say:

“We could stop immigration right now if we left the EU – migrant workers couldn't be used to undercut pay and conditions.”

We can't stick our heads in the sand about immigration and migrant workers. It's an issue a lot of people raise, but quite often when we really get down to it, it's a worry about the impact immigration has on public services, pay and the ability of UK workers to get jobs and housing.

Firstly, where migrant workers are used to drive down wages, they're being exploited too. If we took proper action on employers who get up to this sort of practice, there would be a level playing field for everyone. The UK Government could take action now, by implementing measures to stop agencies actively recruiting workers on low wages and conditions from other countries to come and work in the UK, but it chooses not to.

A lot of our public services actually rely on foreign-trained migrant workers to keep them ticking. That's because under the Tory government, the stress on our public services comes from austerity policies and vast government cuts.

And we should note that in all likelihood, if we're going to continue to trade with the EU if we Brexit, we'll have to agree to free movement of workers anyway. It's a requirement in trade deals, so a country like Norway that trades with the EU has to pay in, has to accept free movement but doesn't have a seat at the table.

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Posted workers

GMB and other unions have long been calling for a revision of the EU posting of workers directive to stop exploitation of workers and undercutting of collective agreements.

The EU has now brought forward proposals that make progress on equal pay for equal work in the same place (so where people work side by side, potentially from different countries, one cannot be paid more than the other).

Some EU member states such as Poland and Romania are trying to block these measures and the UK Government has does not support such rights as well.

Trade unions across the EU need to unite to ensure these protections are delivered. We do that by staying in the EU and fighting for the rights of GMB members as we always have. Those who think otherwise should look at Norway, which isn't in the EU but trades with us, pays into the EU, is required to have free movement of labour in order to trade.

'Miss, Miss, it wasn't me, it was the EU that did it' – or was it?

PFI

PFI's were invented in the UK and many other EU countries saw the danger of them and avoided the poison that was caused in the UK. GMB and other EU trade unions and MEPs campaigned over many years to stop the EU Commission promoting these toxic arrangements – which the UK Government was trying to persuade them to do.

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Privatisation

Some people say:

“The EU is driving privatisation and has forced privatisation of railways, other transport and utilities”

You know when we said the EU isn't perfect? This is one of those times. GMB opposes the liberalising/privatisation agenda of the EU but we need to remember our history and be honest about who started it.

The UK's biggest export to the EU was the privatisation/liberalisation policy mantra. It started with Margaret Thatcher, who privatised our railways before the first EU rail package was even off the blocks. She went on to sell our energy and water utilities for a pittance, because she wanted to – not because she was forced to by the EU, and the tax payer and the public have been paying the price ever since.

Those who argue that we can't keep our public services in public ownership are on a bit of a sticky wicket here - France and Germany have public ownership or control of their utilities – they're in the same EU we are.

In fact, virtually all the services Thatcher sold off are now being run by other EU countries' state owned/controlled companies - EDF, RWE, EON - you just couldn't make it up, could you?

The rest of the EU is holding on to public control of key services - the horse has already bolted in the UK - and if we stand any chance of holding on to other parts of our public services, especially in trade agreements, it is going to be by opposing privatisation at EU level not UK Level.

Austerity

Some people say:

“The EU is responsible for austerity and public sector cuts. We could avoid cuts if we're out.”

Austerity is a political choice. It is a choice being made by Westminster Tories in response to a global economic crash which was caused by under-regulation of the financial sector.

There is a flaw in the logic of those who oppose austerity in the UK, but claim austerity wouldn't be necessary if we weren't in the EU. You can't lambast the government for their political choice and austerity policies then say it's the EU that made it so and we'd be better off if only the Tories had more freedom to pursue austerity.

GMB is clear on this. Let's say it again: austerity is a choice that the UK government has made.

Did you know...?

The economic and social crisis which began in 2008 was global not EU in its making. We can't isolate that to EU level – to do so would simply be wrong. We all know the crisis was caused by financial markets and banks that were criminally under-regulated and with the power to ruin our financial and economic stability. Governments were complicit in their negligence in not seeing the massive risks that were there.

But what happened when the EU Parliament tried to do something about this and regulate financial markets and banks? The self-professed people's friend of the leave campaign Boris Johnson camped out in Brussels - literally - for every finance meeting to block MEPs from legislating to stop the obscene bonuses and speculative investments that put countries' economies in peril.

Oh yes, he was looking after his mates in the City very well, and the British public needs to know that is what drives his interest in the leave campaign, so that his friends can get back to business as usual in the world of casino capitalism.

'Miss, Miss, it wasn't me, it was the EU that did it' – or was it?

Austerity

We will not let the Tories off the hook. Austerity is a political choice and that choice has been made by Tories in Westminster (there's a whole section on this a little bit later).

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Some people say:

“That the way Greece was treated is disgraceful and it shows the EU supports austerity.”

There is no doubt at GMB that the EU commission, acting on pressure from predominantly right wing member state governments, prescribed completely the wrong medicine for the problems at hand in Greece, Ireland and Portugal. The savage austerity measures inflicted on countries forced to take bailouts were criminal and economically just wrong - stifling any potential to stimulate economic growth and demand by starving investment and support of public service jobs, putting millions out of work, in to devastating poverty and worse still, a misery that many could not bear, driving them to take their own lives. There are no words for what is the scandal and crime of this failure of responsibility by governments and authorities but it was driven by individual member state governments acting collectively, not by a mythical EU power.

If EU Governments had seen sense and followed a path of investing out of the crisis instead of cutting, things would look very different across the EU. Things would look very different in the UK as well, but our government was and is wedded to the austerity agenda, one which it pushed across Europe.

But there were and still are voices across the EU who have consistently fought and campaigned for an alternative to austerity - trade unions, and progressive MEPs, governments and parties, and we cannot walk away from calling for these changes in solidarity and common social cause.

The worry is that if our common voice cannot force positive change, we are already seeing the alternative - with far right parties and organisations attempting to feed on this misery by scapegoating migrants, and vulnerable people. The European Union was created out of the need to prevent this happening again, and we cannot let history repeat itself.

Manufacturing and Industry

Some people say:

“The EU prevents us from supporting industry and sustainable manufacturing.”

This just isn't true and it's another one of those things people like to blame on the EU when the UK government should be hanging its head in shame.

The UK has one of the worst records in the EU for not supporting its industries. Let's look at the car industry – Germany, France and Italy still have their key brands BMW, Mercedes, VW, Citroen/Peugeot, Fiat in their national based ownership or control, and they are loyal to buying their country's brands. The UK is a very different story with even Mini now in German ownership. The EU didn't force UK manufacturing out of our hands – we sold off our crown jewels to the highest bidder on the basis of national corporate decisions, and the government never stepped in to help when our industries were in need.

Other EU countries have provided state aid to their industries and this is possible under EU rules. It is the UK that has refused to provide state aid based on a dogma of non-interventionist industrial policy, and they have tried to hide behind EU rules as an excuse for action they wouldn't have taken anyway.

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An interesting fact on steel

The EU offers a globalisation adjustment fund to help support workers in restructuring. Many EU Countries have used this funding to support their workers but the UK Government refuses to access it, and companies can't access it themselves unless their government applies.

In the recent Steel crisis, the EU was keen to put higher tariffs on Chinese imports but it was the UK Government arguing for lower tariffs. Most EU Countries and the European Parliament also oppose China getting market economy status, which would allow them to dump even more cheap manufacturing goods on the UK and EU, but the UK Government did a deal with China during the grand state visit last year and is the cheerleader for them to get this status. The EU is doing more to protect British steel than the British Government.

Market Economy Status explained

A Market Economy is one that is not controlled by the state but is instead based on and influenced by market supply and demand. The EU has set 5 criteria to qualify for Market Economy Status: a low degree of government influence, an absence of state-induced distortions, transparent and non-discriminatory company law, laws on property rights and bankruptcy, and the existence of a genuine financial sector. So far, China meets only one of these.

Big companies, taxes and trade

Some people say:

“EU Treaties allow companies to dodge tax and are an attack on our democracy.”

Let's start by saying that it's not the EU doing cosy deals behind doors in Downing Street to let multinational companies off the hook with their tax dodging – it's the UK government.

The European Parliament is pushing for legislation to stop corporate and governmental tax dodgers by insisting that each company has to declare its interests country-by-country where it is active.

The European Parliament has also pushed investigations of Google, Amazon, Starbucks, Uber and many other tax-dodging companies and shamed them in to coughing up. The Panama and Luxleaks tax scandals have shown that from the Prime Minister down to companies, the UK is up to its neck in unilateral tax dodging. The Tories keep refusing to deal with the UK tax havens in our territories, and don't support EU measures to clamp down hard on tax dodging practices, so we can't blame the EU for this. The problems are much closer to home.

Some people say:

“If we leave the EU we will be free of TTIP and other EU trade deals.”

TTIP is rubbish. We're definitely not fans, and GMB has actively opposed this and other free trade deals and will continue to fight corporate greed. But... if we're not in the EU, do you think the Tories would negotiate something better?

After all, only recently they floated the idea of people giving up some of their employment rights in exchange for a small number of shares in the company they work for.

Even under Obama, the USA operates overtly anti-trade union “right to work” policies in half of its states. Cameron would embrace buttoning this up in a US-UK trade deal to enhance the attacks he has already made in the Trade Union Act.

Imagine what a trade deal with the US will look like if Trump is in power, teamed up with blond bombshell cousin Boris? “Bleached chicken? – Yum! yes please! Climate change? No, we don't believe all that hysterical nonsense either”. We're fighting against TTIP and other corporate trade deals, but a deal between the UK and US will be much worse and the Tories will make trade deals a priority – at any cost.

Some people say:

“We don't need the EU to trade, we can do fine on our own.”

We will still be able to trade, but at a high price, and not just on tariffs. Some Brexiteers mention Norway as doing well out of the EU.

To start with, that's like comparing apples with oranges. Norway has a much smaller population than the UK and therefore very different economic and employment needs. The main point we make here is that Norway is basically in a situation of having to play by EU rules – and pay into the EU by about the same amount as the UK – in order to be allowed to trade with EU countries. But crucially it doesn't get a say on what those rules are. So they might do ok, but they have to accept they have little control over their own situation. And would Norway and others want the UK in their club?

‘Miss, Miss, it wasn't me, it was the EU that did it’ – or was it?

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Tax avoidance

The Chancellor of the Exchequer let Vodafone off the hook with billions of pounds of owed tax. The government allowed Google to pay only a fraction of what it owed the UK tax pot, whilst France rightly took them to the cleaners – even though Google's turnover in the UK is bigger than in France, France got a better deal. If people are avoiding tax here, it's down to the government, not the EU.

So when we are talking about these issues, let's have an honest debate and make sure we are blaming the right people. GMB has never been an apologist for the EU and we are not going to start now, no matter how important this Referendum result is to our members. The Tories are pro free trade, pro liberalisation, pro deregulation - UKIP and the rest of the leave camp are also libertarian supporters of unfettered business freedom, so let's not get into fantasy land that things are any different because that is when things start to fall apart.

Some people say:

“The rest of the EU will have to trade with us, we have things they want to buy.”

We're not saying countries won't trade with us, but we simply don't know what terms that trade will be on and what conditions or tariffs we'll have to accept. Why would we get the same terms and options as other EU countries if we voted not to be in the club?

What's more, if tariffs are placed on UK exports, then companies that sell to the rest of Europe might think twice before making things (and employing people) here.

Civil liberties and human rights

Some people say:

“The EU poses a threat to civil liberties.”

- The EU charter of fundamental rights guarantees most EU citizens a wide range of key rights and principles, including the right to work, right to collective bargaining and representation. The UK refuses to embrace this charter in its full application so reduces our civil rights.
- The idea that Europol (the EU law enforcement agency) and the EU arrest warrant are a threat to us in the UK is nonsense. We should remember that it is through Europol that one of the London Bombers was arrested in Italy. The EU arrest warrant helped to bring to justice the British thugs who viciously attacked GMB member Maggie Hughes' son Robbie in Greece. They offer protection and justice across borders.
- EU Victims' rights for the first time offer victims and their families a voice and protection if they fall victim anywhere in the EU, so we have added protection when we travel. The UK government had to be dragged kicking and screaming in to accepting these rules to protect British people.

Trade Union Solidarity

GMB, like most British unions, has a long history of European and international trade union solidarity. It is in our DNA; Even Unions in the Leave camp – like RMT and the Bakers union, have long been actively involved with our European and International trade union federations, making a valuable contribution.

Our trade union colleagues in these sector federations with us understand and share our anger about the direction the EU has taken, but they want us to stay and fight with them in solidarity for an EU that works for us – not big business. They are glad that most British Unions are campaigning to stay and welcome critical remain campaigns such as GMB's angry yes to remain – because it calls time on business as usual, and they want us to be in to help turn the ship around after 23rd June. It is only natural that they would see a campaign to leave the EU as a betrayal of that solidarity;

Not least because they know that a UK exit from the EU is likely to trigger an EU wide recession and when there is no money around from our biggest trading partner, who do we think is going to buy UK manufactured goods, products and services? – we will be punished for creating the new crisis – it's human nature. There will be a backlash against the UK, to serve as a warning to any other country thinking about leaving, and we will have to deal with it.

'Miss, Miss, it wasn't me, it was the EU that did it' – or was it?

Investing in industry

We hear people claim that the EU prevents us from investing in industry, that's just not true. The fact is that the UK is one of the worse governments in Europe for doing so, but that's by choice of the UK government.

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