

Colum Eastwood, MP
SDLP Leader
121 Ormeau Road
Belfast
BT7 1SH

15/03/2021

Dear Colum,

The Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions supports Unite the Union's call to maintain the Agricultural Wages Board and seeks the Minister of Agriculture, Environment, and Rural Affairs to reverse his ill-judged and short sighted decision to abolish to board. At a recent meeting of our committee all unions representing 200,000 workers unanimously endorsed and supported Unite the Union's campaign to maintain the AWB in order to protect vulnerable low paid agricultural workers in Northern Ireland.

The Agricultural Wages Board brings together representatives of the Ulster Farmers' Union and Unite the Union to annually agree minimum pay scales, piece rates, sick pay, holiday pay and pay in lieu of wages. It also has a very important role in regard to setting the maximum that employers can deduct from wages for non-monetary benefits, such as accommodation.

As such the AWB provides significant protection to some of the most vulnerable workers in Northern Ireland, many of whom are migrant workers with part-time contracts or conducting seasonal work. These are workers who, because of their status, often suffer exploitation and whose households have a high risk of falling into poverty.

The latest Farm statistics confirm that there are almost 12,000 farm workers – two-thirds of whom are either part-time, casual or seasonal.

The trade union movement in Northern Ireland is concerned that moves to abolish the AWB will leave some of the most vulnerable workers with little to no protection. In the last decade, you will be aware that some of the most egregious instances of modern-day slavery in Northern Ireland have occurred in agricultural settings and only last year the Teelings scandal confirmed the exploitation experienced by many agricultural workers elsewhere on this island.

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As evidenced by Unite research in England following the abolition of the AWB there in 2013, the loss of the AWB in Northern Ireland is likely to lead to agricultural workers seeing their average pay falling behind. There are obvious implications for poverty here, especially among women, children and minority groups – and this decision does not appear to recognise the significantly changed labour market conditions prevailing in the agri-food sector post-Brexit. No consideration of these likely impacts appears to have been undertaken ahead of the decision to abolish the board.

Employment rights is a devolved matter exclusively in Northern Ireland. It should be used as a strategic tool to improve our labour market, to build back our economy, to strengthen workers' rights and to promote better productivity as we emerge from Covid 19. Minister Poots' decision will do the opposite in terms of agriculture.

We believe it is essential that all parties in Northern Ireland who value work and workers and want to make work pay must seek the reversal of this decision. Indeed our economy would be much better served if we have widespread sectoral bargaining across the private sector.

I would be grateful if you could write back to me and confirm your party position on this matter so I can report back to Unite the Union and the other 24 unions across Northern Ireland which support this campaign to retain the AWB.

I look forward to hearing from you.
Yours sincerely,



Owen Reidy

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