

**#####CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY#####**

## **Speech to CLASS CONFERENCE 2016**

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**Unite the union**

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### **Workers need safeguards and strong unions to make migration work**

Brothers and Sisters

First of all let me congratulate CLASS and its Director Faiza Shaheen on this great conference today.

Unite is proud of the part it played in establishing the movement's very own think-tank, and it is wonderful to see it now advancing its work by leaps and bounds.

I was asked to speak in this last session to give the conference a rousing conclusion.

Of course, it is hard to be rousing when you are as adrift in the opinion polls as Labour is today.

Because most of what CLASS is advocating – the policies it is developing across a range of issues – will require a Labour government to put them into practice.

There are many reasons for this present poll deficit, one of them of course the summer wasted on an unnecessary bout of internal warfare triggered by some in the PLP.

But another is the subject I want to say a few words about today – immigration, the free movement of labour or however you want to describe it. What I would like to do is open up a debate on how our movement should respond, rather than pretend to say the last word on it.

There is no doubt that concerns about the impact of the free movement of Labour in Europe played a large part in the referendum result, particularly in working-class communities.

It is those same communities – traditionally Labour-supporting – where our Party is now struggling.

It would be easy to simply say – let’s pull up the drawbridge. However, that would be entirely impractical in today’s world and it would also alienate many of those whose support the Labour Party needs to retain as part of its 2020 electoral coalition.

But we are well past the point where the issue can be ignored. Indeed, I can reveal that as long ago as 2009 Unite private surveys of membership opinion were showing that even then our members were more concerned about immigration than any other political issue.

And we are also, I would argue, past the point where working people can be convinced that the free movement of labour has worked for them, their families, their industries and their communities.

It is fine to argue values and perspectives for the middle distance, but if it comes up against the reality of people’s daily experience, these arguments will fail.

Let’s have no doubt – the free movement of labour is a class question.

Karl Marx identified that fact a long time ago. “A study of the struggle waged by the British working class,” he wrote in 1867, “reveals that in order to oppose their workers, the employers either bring in workers from abroad or else transfer manufacture to countries where there is a cheap labour force.”

So it is today. Anyone who has had to negotiate for workers, in manufacturing in particular, knows the huge difficulties that have been caused by the ability of capital to move production around the world – often to China and the Far East or Eastern Europe – in search of far lower labour costs and higher profits.

Likewise, the elite’s use of immigration to this country is not motivated by a love of diversity or a devotion to multi-culturalism. It is instead all part of the flexible labour market model, ensuring a plentiful supply of cheap labour here for those jobs that can’t be exported elsewhere.

The benefits of this are for sure easier to see in Muswell Hill than they are in Middlesbrough.

Of course, all socialists must ultimately look forward to a day when people can move freely across the world and live or work where they will.

But that is a utopia removed from the world of today, and would require international economic planning and public ownership to make a reality.

Argument that wage rates are not affected does not stand up to scrutiny either. Put simply, if all you have to sell is your capacity to work, then its value is going to be affected by an influx of people willing to work for less money and put up with a lower standard of living because it nevertheless improves their own lives. Supply and demand affects the sale of labour too, pitting worker against worker.

Of course, there is a straightforward trade union response - we need to do everything necessary to organise all workers here into trade unions, wherever they may have been

born and whatever their history, and fight for decent pay, proper working conditions and full rights at work.

And we should join Labour in demanding that this country – the sixth richest in the world – provides every worker, wherever they are from, with a decent job and every family with a decent home.

And unions here need to unite with trade unions in other countries to end to the playing off of workers in one part of the world against each other, to oppose the power of global capital with the power of a renewed international labour movement,.

The problem is not cheap labour in Britain – *it's cheap labour anywhere.*

And let's not pretend that free movement is a straightforward benefit to the countries workers are leaving behind, being denuded of young people and skilled labour. We need to work with Socialists across Europe and indeed the world to create a system that works for everyone, wherever they are born.

There is another more immediate argument for free movement of Labour – it is the price for keeping access to the single market, which is essential for so many British jobs. That problem needs to be frankly acknowledged – fixed barriers to free movement will hardly be acceptable to the European Union if access to the single market is to be retained.

So we need a new approach. I believe it is time to change the language around this issue and move away from talk of “freedom of movement” on the one hand and “controls” on the other and instead to speak of safeguards.

Safeguards for communities, safeguards for workers, and safeguards for industries needing labour.

At the core of this must be the reassertion of collective bargaining and trade union strength.

My proposal is that any employer wishing to recruit labour abroad can only do so if they are either covered by a proper trade union agreement, or by sectoral collective bargaining.

Put together with trade unions own organising efforts this would change the race-to-the-bottom culture into a rate- for-the- job society.

It would end the fatal attraction of ever cheaper workers for employers, and slash demand for immigrant labour, without the requirement for formal quotas or restrictions.

Add to this proposal Jeremy Corbyn's commitment to fair rules and reasonable management of migration, as well as Labour's pledge to restore the Migrant Impact Fund for communities suddenly affected by large—scale migration, and there is the basis for giving real reassurance to working people in towns and cities abandoned by globalisation.

And let's not forget what unites all of us:

Anger at the government's disgraceful treatment of refugees, who deserve safety and protection

Shame at the Tory attempts to use EU citizens already living and working here as a sort of negotiating card – they must have the right to remain

And a determination to resist the rise in racist attacks and invective which has blighted our society past-referendum

But we can no longer sit like the three wise monkeys, seeing no problem, hearing no problem and speaking of no problem.

We must listen and respond to working people's concerns – because that is the only way to earn their support

That way we can consign today's opinion polls to the dustbin and convince working people that the labour movement is their best protection in an uncertain present and their best hope for a prosperous future.

**ENDS**