



GENERAL SECRETARY'S OFFICE

21 January 2021

Rt Hon Kwasi Kwarteng MP
Secretary of State
Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
1 Victoria Street
London SW1H 0ET

Via email: Minister.Kwarteng@beis.gov.uk

Dear Secretary of State,

First, allow me to congratulate you on your appointment as Secretary of State for the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. I look forward to working with you as we seek to renew the economy post-pandemic. Certainly, a comprehensive industrial strategy, one which engages all stakeholders, and sectors, will be central to creating jobs, raising skills and addressing the chronic low wages and job insecurity in this country.

As you will be aware, Unite has played a vital role throughout the pandemic, and I suggest that we meet as soon as is possible to discuss these matters.

On this occasion, however, I am also writing to express the concerns of Unite, the country's biggest and most influential private sector union, about your plans to review workers' rights. Unite is engaged with some 38,000 employers around the country, of all shapes and sizes, on a daily basis and I can confirm categorically that altering the basic legal rights of their workers is not their priority. Instead, they tell us that they want stability, investment, improved skills across the workforce and the promised industrial strategy to lead to active government engagement with them in the support and renewal of UK industry.

There seems to be some confusion about what exactly the government is proposing with the public position changing in the past week. Can you confirm that there is a review, what rights are under review, the basis for the review and the process for engagement on this review with trade unions?

We would, of course, oppose any efforts by the government to diminish the rights of the workers of this country, who have committed themselves fully to public service during this year of crisis despite the appalling behaviour of some employers. This crisis in one way has been predictable; it has seen opportunistic employers including British Airways, Heathrow Airport Limited and the Go Ahead group move to rewrite contracts, reduce wages and extend working hours. The ease with which they can do so, confident in there being no reproach whatsoever from the government, underlines that workers in this country are already the easiest to mistreat and make redundant among the European economies. A responsible government, committed to levelling up and arresting inequality, should be moving to prevent such abuses, not making them more likely.

I also note that your government has established a 30-strong panel of business advisors to offer their views on your proposals to change workers' rights. I would urge you not to make the mistake of previous Conservative administrations of refusing to engage with the trade unions of this country on the same basis. Any moves that divide employers from their workforces and those who will feel the full effect of any subsequent government

policies only serves to sow the seeds of distrust and concern, which would be extremely unhelpful at any time but particularly so while the country faces profound enormous health and economic challenges that are best met collectively and positively, not with working people fearing attack. I therefore urge you to move swiftly to involve the trade unions in your advisory panel and accord them the same stakeholder status and full engagement as that given to business. Unite, of course, stands ready to take part at any time.

My final request is that your department undertakes a full equality impact assessment of any proposed changes to workers' rights. As the row over Universal Credit reminds us, there are millions of working poor in this country and they are disproportionately women, black and Asian ethnic minorities, disabled and young workers. There are also an estimated five million workers without job security. Attacks on working time, for example, are highly likely to make the lives of these workers and that of their families even harder. Longer working hours are certain to come with no additional rise in wages and so in effect will lead to pay cuts, putting many below the legal minimum wage. Longer working hours also put health and safety at risk because exhausted workers are unsafe workers, and will place rest and family time under immense stress. They also place enormous pressures on parents and carers struggling to support their families and others dependent on them, and can disproportionately impact adversely on working women, particularly black women, and disabled workers. These consequences must be fully considered and and be fully and publicly disclosed so that any subsequent changes can be properly understood by decision-makers.

UK workers already work some of the longest hours in Europe, and, I repeat, job insecurity, low skills and low wages are endemic in this country. For our people and economy to thrive, I would urge that government focuses its efforts on addressing these very real challenges, not on divisive, potentially discriminatory and fear-inducing plans to revise workers' rights for which there is no clamour.

It is concerning indeed that the government appears to be using the cover of a crisis as an opportunity to attack workers' basic legal rights. We were promised that the UK would be a beacon to the world; the government must make good on this promise because working people have given so much to this country in the last year and deserve support, not further and needless insecurity.

I sincerely hope that there is an opportunity to discuss these concerns in the immediate future.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Len m McCluskey". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

LEN McCLUSKEY
General Secretary