

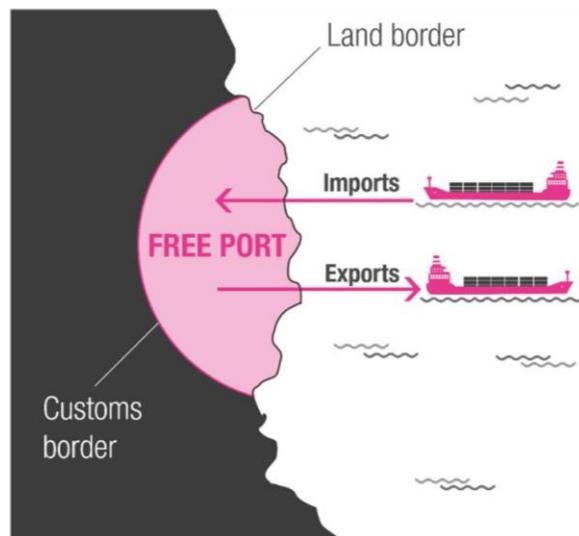
UNITE TRANSPORT & FOOD UPDATE

Update No.6 – Freeports, Drivers, Settled Status, Mental Health

Freeports: The government has announced it will set up 8 freeports across **England** for companies to import, process and then re-export out of the UK from the freeport, rather than distribute goods around the UK. To encourage these companies, normal tax and customs rules won't apply in freeports. The risk for workers is that labour rights and decent pay which won't apply in these zones either. Freeports are also linked to tax avoidance, criminal activity and money laundering.

Freeport bidding groups are made up of ports, airports, rail terminals, local authorities and major employers in **Transport and Food**. The freeports announced in the March Budget are: **Thames (including London Gateway Port and the Port of Tilbury); Liverpool City Region; Solent; East Midlands; Freeport East (Felixstowe and Harwich); Plymouth and South Devon; Humber; and Teesside**. The **Scottish** government is proposing 'greenports' – freeports but with commitments to the Real Living Wage, transitions to net zero emissions, and sustainable growth. But these don't as yet have a legal framework in international law, unlike freeports. **Wales** is due to get a freeport; there is uncertainty as to whether there will a freeport in **Northern Ireland**.

Unite is monitoring these proposals as they don't include guarantees on workers' rights, such as access to workplaces for unions to organise. Unless workers' rights and pay are guaranteed in freeports, supply chain solidarity between Unite sectors will be critical to secure protection for workers alongside benefits for employers. We need to see evidence that freeports won't just suck in jobs and investment from other areas. The government wants them up and running later in 2021, perhaps as early as June.



To avoid a 'race to the bottom' Unite's industrial strategy for freeports aims to build solidarity across all Unite sectors in defence of worker's rights as they will all potentially be affected – from construction projects to local authority joint working and manufacturing, and all parts of **Transport and Food**.



Road transport: A nationwide shortage of drivers' facilities, undercutting, congestion and its impact on drivers' hours – Unite members in road transport have demanded better and safer work conditions for years. Brexit has made things worse. In November Unite national officer Adrian Jones gave evidence to a House of Lords committee, calling on the government to meet Unite and find solutions ahead to the problems already stacking up. Since then border restrictions and extra paperwork have piled on top of queues at ports, with Kent the epicentre of delays. HGV drivers are being fined for resting including in laybys. Alternatively, they must park in lorry parks with poor facilities, or drive out of the county while battling fatigue. Added to this was a short-term relaxation of drivers' hours rules in December, the government's response to Covid, high demand for goods, Brexit-linked port congestion. **Unite is committed to defending drivers' conditions, including hours and facilities.**

Settled status: a key deadline for Unite members who need to apply for settled status is **30 June 2021**. It's the last date (in most cases) for 3 million EU citizens to put in an application for the right to permanent residence in the UK, or 'settled status'. Campaigners are calling for a deadline extension – the Home Office has a major backlog of applications, and charities supporting vulnerable applicants have been hit by Covid restrictions on face-to-face meetings that help with the complex process, rules and paperwork. But it's by no means certain that the 30 June deadline will change. The TUC has a guide for reps, 'The EU settlement scheme and supporting EU workers', available online, with essential information to support members and prevent discrimination. It also gives clear guidance on whether employers have to check on a worker's settled status (answer: they don't), particularly as some employers are taking advantage of uncertainty around the scheme to pressurise or harass employees. <https://tinyurl.com/243chd4b>

Mental health during Covid-19: many have struggled with mental health through the pandemic. In the workplace and in our union meetings, reps report how tough going it is. Unite's mental health guide, 'Under the strain of a pandemic', pulls together advice for reps and members, and adds to all the resources for coronavirus, available online.

Mental health guide: <https://unitetheunion.org/media/3013/202-unitementalhealthguide-20-04-09-v01b.pdf>

Coronavirus resources:

<https://unitetheunion.org/campaigns/coronavirus-covid-19-advice/>

