

Strasbourg Round-Up

British – and EU - Jobs for British Workers...

The February Strasbourg plenary session coincided with the outbreak of a series of wildcat strikes across the UK, including the North West. The walk-outs were in protest against claims that British workers were being denied employment on a major construction project at a Total oil refinery in Lincolnshire. Not altogether surprisingly, some tried to pin the blame for the dispute on the EU. But amidst all the hype, Gary tried to bring some perspective to the issue.

Accepting that some recent European Court of Justice rulings had created loopholes, which some unscrupulous employers would inevitably try to exploit, he said there was an urgent need to look again at the relevant EU legislation. “But this is not a time to call for banning EU workers in Britain,” he warned. “For a start, EU laws which allow Britons to work in other EU countries are helping reduce pressure on the UK labour market. Currently 2 million British people live and work in continental Europe, whereas only 1 million EU citizens work in the UK.”

“Equally, EU laws are in place to ensure that anyone working in the UK, whether British, Italian or Latvian, must be protected by UK labour laws covering entitlements to the likes of the minimum wage, paid holidays and proper health and safety provision. However, if these rules are broken by cowboy bosses, whether in the UK or elsewhere in Europe, Labour MEPs – with the full support of all our Socialist MEP colleagues – will not stand for wage undercutting and social dumping.”

Guantanamo

New US President Barack Obama’s announcement that he intends to close the Guantanamo detention camp is a welcome one, but it does create a dilemma for European countries. Should they take Guantanamo prisoners? During a debate on the issue in Strasbourg, a small number of MEPs voiced security concerns. However, Labour MEPs endorsed the UK government’s position, which is to support the Obama initiative by offering to repatriate British citizens and those connected with Britain who are former prisoners.

Gary said: “President Obama has taken a crucial step to improve America’s policy on human rights. Now the EU as a whole should do what it can to support it. I’m glad to see that MEPs voted overwhelmingly in favour of encouraging EU member countries to take back their own citizens. Every member state should play its part.”

Child protection

It’s every parent’s worst nightmare – discovering that their child has been sexually exploited, after being “groomed” by a paedophile in an internet chat room. That is why this month in Strasbourg, MEPs voted to make all types of sexual abuse of children a criminal offence whilst making sex crimes subject to extra-territorial legislation. MEPs called upon member states to exchange information in these sorts of cases to help catch paedophiles before they strike.

Alzheimer’s

The February plenary session saw the European Parliament adopt a written declaration, which calls for Alzheimer’s disease to be made a public health priority within the EU. Over 6 million Europeans are affected by the disease and this figure is set to double or even triple between now and 2050, given the EU’s ageing population.

MEPs called for more research into the causes, prevention and treatment of Alzheimer’s; more early diagnoses; help for patients and carers and support for Alzheimer’s associations. Gary said: “I joined over 400 other MEPs in signing this declaration because I want to see the suffering caused by

Alzheimer's reduced as much as possible. Most of us know someone who has been affected by the disease and know what a huge impact it has on people's lives."

The not-so-nice face of the Tories appearing yet again...

The Tories' cuddly image took another beating this month in Strasbourg, as they thwarted attempts to make development a priority for EU Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with developing countries. They ganged up with the Liberals to force through controversial trade deals which will open up some of the world's poorest countries' economies to EU exports.

Socialists from across the EU and especially Labour MEPs have been calling for EPAs to be "instruments of development" and for "aid for trade" commitments which would help these countries export to the EU. Speaking after the vote, Gary said: "Labour MEPs have been working closely with the new UK European Commissioner, Baroness Cathy Ashton, to try to improve these EPAs before they come into force. No developing country should be manipulated into an agreement which doesn't work for them too."

EU Energy Plan

Since last month's gas dispute between the Ukraine and Russia, securing energy supplies has been high on the agenda for European policy makers. This month in Strasbourg, MEPs voted on a blueprint for the EU's future energy strategy, to ensure that the EU is well equipped to face future potential energy shortages.

The recommendations include mandatory emergency action plans in case of gas supply shortages; more energy grid interconnections between Member States and a specific road map for investment in nuclear energy. Key new climate change targets were also proposed, which would see greenhouse gases cut by at least 80% by 2050.

Welcoming the plan, Gary said: "The Ukraine-Russia gas crisis gave us all cause for concern. We don't want our Eastern European partners to find themselves without heating again next winter, any more than if it happened to us. This plan is an important contribution to ensuring that the entire EU can stay warm in winters to come."

And Finally...

Snow storms across Europe prevented many MEPs from reaching Strasbourg on time this month - just another reason, in an already overflowing list, to scrap the monthly trip. There was a silver lining to the snow clouds though: whatever else the eurosceptic Tories or UKIP members blame on the EU, at least they couldn't claim that the EU was responsible for the bad weather. Or could they?

Gary Titley MEP
February 2009