

## Trade union and employment rights in the Courageous Sta..

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*My 2011 book, [The Courageous State](#) ended with several chapters that set out a plan, by issue, for for country I wished to live in and which would deserve the description within the book's title. I thought I'd share four sections from chapter 16 this morning. I suspect I'd be more specific and maybe a little bolder now as the issues have become ever more apparent, but these extracts remain some indication of where I stand, and have for some time:*

### ***Increasing the minimum wage***

The desire to work to maintain one's self, or to maintain one's family, is core to the human condition. The provision of employment opportunities for all who want them must be a fundamental objective of the Courageous State and a condition for the achievement of potential for most who live in it.

Ways of creating new employment in the UK through the creation of an investment bank that will build new infrastructure to support a long-term sustainable economy have already been discussed but it is as important that the employment created sustains those who are engaged in it. That means that at a minimum a person should be able to live without suffering relative poverty on the reward of their employment.

The minimum wage was one of the great successes of the Labour governments between 1997 and 2010. It was universally condemned when proposed, with claims being made that it would create mass unemployment and harm business, but neither happened. The real wages of many were increased as a result of that legislation, but it remains the case that a minimum wage of only just over £6 an hour is far too little to ensure most people, even people living by themselves, can sustain themselves without risk of being in relative, and sometimes absolute, poverty. As a consequence those employers paying at this rate at present receive a massive effective subsidy from the state because their employees must apply for benefits to ensure that they can live at the most basic standard of living. That is ludicrous: to support business to pay wages that are below poverty levels makes no sense at all and the minimum wage must be increased to reflect the real cost of living, if necessary with regional variations to reflect

the fact that, for example, living in London is more expensive than in some other areas.

### ***Protecting union rights***

A minimum wage is a basic prerequisite for ensuring that an employee can sustain themselves as a result of their own efforts, but it is not enough to protect them from all situations that might arise during the course of their employment. The employer/employee relationship is a perfect example of an asymmetric relationship, with the employee almost always having the weaker negotiating hand. It is not by chance that the trade union movement helped employees throughout the UK achieve some of the most basic advances in employment rights ever seen. So, for example, they helped secured legislation on health and safety, paid holidays, equal pay, protection from dismissal and much more.

It is now popular to dismiss union power on the basis of some excesses in the 1970s, and there is no doubt that unions must not be in a position to influence the economy in the way that banks do now, but to deny employees the right to collective bargaining, protection in industrial disputes, and representation in the workplace is to deny them fundamental human rights and as such the role of unions in the workplace must be supported by a Courageous State.

### ***Industry wages boards***

Collective bargaining is powerful: it has almost invariably improved the lot of those workers whose conditions are negotiated in this way, to their own benefit, and although many will only grudgingly admit it, to the long-term benefit of their employers as well. There are, however, many situations where collective bargaining cannot be applied. This is, for example, the case when the place of employment is small or the workforce is widely dispersed. This happens in retailing, restaurants, agriculture, and many small businesses. In these cases there has been too prevalent a tendency for business to offer the minimum wage as if it was the de facto basis for employment, whatever the skills a person has to offer and whatever their worth to the enterprise. That is wrong, and was recognised to be wrong in the past when industrial wages boards set minimum pay levels for particular skills in specified sectors to ensure that people would not exploited whatever their particular employment circumstance. The restoration of these boards with the task of setting minimum standards for pay and conditions of employment seems a basic necessity to ensure that all employees are properly rewarded without the difficulty and embarrassment of complicated negotiation having to take place in situations which inevitably favour the employer.

Of course such boards cannot provide an ideal solution for all employment situations, all skills and all environments but they can offer clear guidelines, empower employees and ensure that people can advance their claim for rightful reward against pre-established benchmarks which should make reaching fair agreement easier for all.

## ***Apprenticeships***

Fair pay is an important part of the workplace relationship, but it is by no means the only component of a successful working relationship in which both employee and employer benefit.

There is widespread recognition that the UK has a skills shortage and that this is particularly prevalent among the young, where currently education is heavily focused on academic achievement even if that has little bearing upon the needs of an eventual employer.

It is obvious the UK needs more skilled employees, and not just those with academic qualifications. Apprenticeships were at one time the foundation upon which the skills of our economy were built. Those who would master a trade, prove their skills and demonstrate their worth were rightly rewarded for doing so. This fostered the skills that society needed while training in the workplace built a strong sense of community and provided the skills needed in the local economy to meet local demand. Apprenticeship is an essential way of delivering this opportunity to young people and as such financial incentives, support and if necessary tax encouragement must be given to both employees and employers to participate in these arrangements, with the inherent long-term relationship that they also imply.

## ***Industrial training boards***

Apprenticeships are vital but the skills a person needs change during their life, as do the jobs that people undertake. Skilled employees add value and yet far too few employers invest anything at all in the skills of their staff. This results in a loss in productivity, profit and opportunity for advancement on the part of those they employ. This is a scandalous waste of resources that must be corrected.

In more enlightened times industrial training boards existed in the UK to ensure that those who worked in a wide variety of industries, from the service sector to heavy manufacturing and construction had access to training appropriate to their needs at reasonable cost that ensured that they could fulfil their potential at work. A Courageous State would reintroduce such boards and provide employees with a statutory right to training during the course of their employment, for which their employers would make only modest payment.