

TO: ALL UNITE RAAW MEMBERS & BRANCHES;
RAAW ACTIVISTS & REPS;
REGIONAL OFFICERS WITH RAAW RESPONSIBILITIES;
RAAW RISC & NISC MEMBERS;
REGIONAL SECRETARIES (for information)

Dear Colleague,

Abolition of the Agricultural Wages Board

As you may be aware, on 22nd July Caroline Spelman, Environment Secretary, announced the Government's intention to abolish the Agricultural Wages Board (AWB) for England & Wales. At a meeting of the AWB later that week Unite representatives attempted to clarify how and when this would be done, but it was clear that no real thought has been given to the Parliamentary process and details were frustratingly scant. Although the proposal is for England & Wales only at the moment, it is clear that abolition would have knock on effects for the AWBs in Scotland and Northern Ireland, as the National Farmers Union (NFU) have already issued press releases calling on the devolved governments to follow Westminster's lead. This is therefore an issue for all UK agricultural workers.

Following the announcement, Unite responded with a series of press releases, interviews and articles to highlight the dangers of abolition. We have also worked closely with Hilary Benn, Labour's Shadow Environment Secretary, and with the TUC. Discussions have also taken place with other trade unions, including PCS, Prospect and the NUT, with a view to joint campaigning on this issue. In addition we have lobbied the Welsh Assembly Government and are seeking to build an alliance with the Farmers Union of Wales, who support the AWB.

The AWB has been in continuous existence in one form or another since 1924. It is no coincidence that the last major dispute in agriculture was in 1923 when 10,000 farm workers went on strike in Norfolk over pay cuts. The AWB is directly responsible for a harmonious industrial relations environment, which in turn has guaranteed the security of UK food supplies.

Opponents of the AWB argue that the legislation is unnecessary now that there is a National Minimum Wage (NMW). This entirely misses the point of the AWB. Whilst it is true that Grade 1 rates are only 1p an hour more than the NMW (2p an hour more from 1st October), only 20% of workers covered by the AWB are on Grade 1. 80% of the 154,000 workers covered directly by the AWB are on Grades 2-6 at rates from £6.40 an hour (£6.58 from 1st October) to £8.64 an hour (£8.88 an hour from 1st October).

Opponents of the AWB also conveniently forget that the Agricultural Wages Order also covers grading arrangements; skills and qualifications; overtime; training costs; apprenticeships; allowances and grants; holidays and other leave; sick pay and much more besides. Most significantly, the Agricultural Wages Act also regulates the

provision of tied housing, which 30% of farm workers live in, protecting workers from punitive rent rises and eviction from their homes. All this protection would be lost with abolition.

The proposal for abolition of the AWB was in the Tory election manifesto, but not in the Liberal Democrats manifesto. Abolition of the AWB was not part of the coalition agreement between the Tories and the Lib Dems. Significantly, DEFRA is one of the few Government Departments without a Lib Dem Minister. We know from the reaction of Lib Dem delegates at a fringe meeting we ran on AWB abolition at their Party Conference that many grass roots Lib Dem members and MPs are extremely concerned about abolition. It is critical that we persuade Lib Dem MPs to oppose abolition of the AWB if we are to save the Board and the protection it ensures.

The call for abolition has been driven by the NFU, and we believe that this is down to their horticultural industry members. This part of agriculture is under pressure from the supermarkets to supply fruit and vegetables at ever tighter margins, and the industry is seeking to cut their costs at the expense of workers. We have asked the NFU how wage rates would be set for grades 2-6 if abolition goes ahead, and how the industry would attract the 60,000 new entrants over the next ten years, which Lantra, the Sector Skills Council for agriculture, says are necessary just to stand still. There has been no response from the NFU and it is clear that they have given no thought to how wages would be negotiated or set post-abolition.

We have argued that industrial action would be inevitable as the union fought to maintain and improve pay and conditions. For the first time since 1923 agricultural strikes are a real possibility.

What you can do to help:

Tom Blenkinsop, Labour MP for Middlesborough South and East Cleveland has tabled an Early Day Motion on the Agricultural Wages Board, EDM 754:

“That this House believes that the Agricultural Wages Board has played an important role in setting wages and terms and conditions of employment for farm workers and in developing a highly skilled workforce in the rural economy; notes that the existence of the Agricultural Wages Board has promoted harmonious industrial relations between farmers and farm workers, so contributing directly to greater food security; and therefore opposes the Government’s proposal to abolish the Agricultural Wages Board for England and Wales.”

- Write to your MP, whichever party they are from, asking them to sign the Early Day Motion and to write to Caroline Spelman, asking her to remove repeal of the Agricultural Wages Act 1948 from the Public Bodies (Reform) Bill – you can use the model letter enclosed;

- Turn up at your MPs surgery to argue in person that they should oppose abolition of the AWB;
- Write to your local paper in support of the AWB and opposing abolition;
- Collect signatures on the enclosed petition;
- Write to your local Lib Dem Party Chair urging them to oppose abolition of the AWB;
- Email me at ian.waddell@unitetheunion.org to let me know what you have done and what responses you get.

The union's website contains details of the campaign to save the AWB and we will continue to update this as the campaign progresses.

http://www.unitetheunion.org/campaigns/save_the_awb.aspx

There will also be regular updates in forthcoming editions of the Landworker.

Your support is crucial if we are to persuade MPs that the AWB plays a critical role in ensuring good industrial relations in agriculture and the security of the UK's food supplies. Most importantly for our members, it sets minimum pay and terms and conditions which would be eroded if the Board were abolished. We cannot let that happen.

Yours in solidarity,



Ian Waddell
National Officer - RAAW