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LEN MCCLUSKEY

Speech to UNITE DEFENCE CONFERENCE
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Brothers and Sisters

I am delighted to be here with you today. This is a conference on one of the most critical issues facing our union today.

But it is more than a conference. It is a statement too.

It is a statement that Unite will fight – without reservation, without equivocation, without hesitation – to defend every last job of our members in the defence industry.

It is a statement that you gathered here today, Unite members from across the country and across the industry, represent the real trade union for defence workers in the UK.

And it is a clear message to politicians that this union will never support any public policy which sees our members and their communities thrown on the scrapheap.

I know and appreciate the value of the work done by those you represent.

Just this morning I had the privilege of visiting Warton and saw for myself the incredible skills our members bring to bear in building Hawks and Typhoons. I’ve also had the chance to visit other yards and factories during my time as General Secretary of Unite and it never fails to amaze me when I see what you do in your jobs.

The skills. The application. The productivity and the ingenuity. You represent the best of British manufacturing capabilities, and the best of an industrial tradition that too many politicians have been too careless about for too long.

It is far more than a tradition, of course. It is a living reality.

Up and down the country, communities depend on the defence industry for their prosperity, for jobs, for a future for young people, and for economic security. No trade union that I lead is ever going to allow any of that to be put at risk.

It was inspirational to hear from Jade, a young woman working in this industry and a fantastic role model for young people thinking about apprenticeships - defence companies lead the way in training our young people into highly skilled jobs. We need a thousand more Jades in Britain today!

Instead, tens of thousands of jobs have been lost in defence over the last decade due to short-sighted and fatally flawed government decisions.

We’ve heard today how “value for money” is used as an argument to buy defence equipment from overseas - usually the USA. But what a false economy that is.
Spending British taxpayers’ money buying British-built equipment isn’t just good for your companies and your jobs - it’s also good news for the Treasury who get tax revenues back straight away, and for the UK economy as workers employed here spend money in shops, pubs and restaurants here at home.

And on top of this, every job in a company like BAE Systems is supported by another seven in the supply chain - also paying tax and fuelling the economy.

You would think that buying British-built equipment for our Armed Forces would therefore be a no-brainer - it’s obvious that buying British-built kit is good for the country.

So I was thunderstruck to hear what Francis Tusa had to say in the film. This government will actually double the amount of defence pounds spendt in the USA by 2020.

Meanwhile, those fantastically skilled Unite members I met at Warton this morning are facing a real crisis. Five thousand jobs will go over the next four years at BAE, and that means for every job lost there, between five and seven are at risk in the supply chain.

That adds up to forty thousand jobs at risk overall in the UK.

That is am industrial scandal and if there wer enot already enough other reasons to sack Goerge Osborne, his reckless approach to this vital industry would be enough on its own to show him the door.

If you need one clear example of the vandalism being wreaked by the Tories on defence then look no further than the utter disgrace of what happened to Nimrod.

You all remember the scenes we saw on the news five years ago when the government - led by the same Tory Prime Minister and Tory Chancellor - ordered the destruction of the MRA4 Nimrods.

To make it worse, they also destroyed the jigs, ensuring that the aircraft could never be resurrected. Workers at Woodford lost their jobs and the UK lost a critical capability to patrol and protect its shores. £4billion of investment was written off overnight.

Wind forward five years and the same Conservative Prime Minister and Chancellor preside over a decision to fill the capability gap they caused by the scrapping of Nimrod.

And what do they do? They order replacement planes from the USA. A billion pounds of our money being spent in America to fill a gap this government itself created, on top of the four billion wasted scrapping a world class plane.


I welcome the call that our reps have made today for a sixth generation fighter aircraft to be developed, safeguarding highly skilled jobs for the long term.

I support our members on the Clyde, battling for the world-class frigate factory they were promised when shipbuilding ended at Portsmouth and 1775 jobs were lost in shipbuilding, half of those on the Clyde.
I also recognise the challenges facing workers building helicopters, radars, sensors, satellites, vehicles and ammunition. I know that there are difficulties to confront across the defence sector.

But I want you to know that this union, your union, is right there with you and will support you every step of the way.

Let me also make it clear – and there should be no doubt about it - Unite is also right behind every member involved in our nation’s submarine industry.

There are many of the key sites represented in the hall today – Azza Samms from Barrow has already spoken to you, but we also have superb representation from Faslane and Coulport; from Devonport; Derby; Rosyth and from the Atomic Weapons Establishment.

Comrades, Unite stands with you. You have the same right to expect your union’s support as every other one of our 1.4 million members, and you will get that support.

We all understand the politics of the situation. The decision to replace Trident would be in the spotlight whenever it was taken. There is nothing illegitimate in debating the cost, the strategic thinking, or the morality. That is normal in a democratic society.

Some are trying to make this all about the Labour Party. Jeremy Corbyn has the views on disarmament that he has always held, and I think the public are tired of politicians who trim their opinions to fit fashion.

I respect that – and him. But the Labour Party must respect this – Unite is a trade union and for us, our members, their jobs and their communities must come first.

So we will play a full part in Labour’s very welcome Defence Review led by Emily Thornberry, ensuring your concerns and aspirations are fully heard.

The Aerospace & Shipbuilding National Sector Committee will lead for us on that submission, making the urgent case for a new Defence Industrial Strategy, which should identify key sovereign capabilities and the policies needed to defend the manufacturing base that delivers those capabilities.

But our focus must first of all be on the government. That is where decisions are being made, and the the Tories are playing games with your jobs.

They are trying to keep the whole issue of nuclear weapons in the news because it embarrasses Labour and covers up their own deep splits over Europe rather than engaging in the debate and responsibly planning for the future of the industry.

So I will fight to defend our members in the submarine industry anywhere, anytime.

Unite will campaign for a UK defence industry that allows us to design and build ships, submarines, aircraft, helicopters, weapons, ammunition, radar and sensors, missiles and armoured vehicles.

The list will change as technology develops, but the message is clear – the forces need this equipment and we need to build it.
A critical part of any Defence Industrial Strategy must be around procurement. I have already indicated how this government is letting us down.

So let me make it clear: UK forces should use UK built equipment, protecting UK workers’ jobs and contributing to our economy.

Of course, this goes beyond the defence sector alone. Britain needs a Britain-first manufacturing procurement policy.

A system where British Police Forces drive cars made in Britain; where British hospitals use medical equipment made in Britain, receiving patients in ambulances made in Britain.

A system where British built trains run on our railways.

A system where British ships are made with British steel.

This isn’t a nationalist rant - it’s a call for our government to support our economy and our jobs, something that every other government in the world seems to regard as natural.

If we did the same, then I believe the whole debate around defence diversification, a debate which has gone exactly nowhere for decades, would be much more realistic.

Brothers and sisters

Your industry is a key part of our manufacturing base. You develop technologies that spin off into other fields and benefit us all. Supply chain companies use the funding from defence projects to branch out into other areas including commercial aerospace, automotive, IT, rail and oil and gas exploration.

You are at the centre of a web of connections that benefits the whole of our economy.

This conference demonstrates the central importance of your industry to our country.

So, all of you here to rest assured that Unite will use all our strength industrially and politically to defend your jobs and your industry.

And we have the strength of being the country’s biggest union, and its most politically influential.

Take this message back to every factory, every office, every yard represented here today.

YOU are Unite. And Unite stands with you.