

THE ANDREW MARR SHOW, BBC1

9TH SEPTEMBER 2018FRANCES O'GRADY, GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE
TUC

Andrew Marr (AM): Now, 150 years ago groups of trade unionists gathered in Manchester to form one single organisation what they decided to call the Trades Unions Congress and it should they said back then 'take action in all parliamentary matters pertaining to the general interests of the working classes'. Today that must mean how and whether we leave the EU, Frances O'Grady general secretary of the TUC now joins me on the line from Salford just down the road from where that historic mechanics interview took place. Frances O'Grady welcome. Can I ask you first of all, in general terms what does the TUC want from the Brexit negotiations?

Frances O'Grady (FO): Well, we've been very clear from the start that we need a deal that protects jobs, protects workers' rights and avoids a hard border in Ireland. We've accepted the result, but we're very clear that the Prime Minister should make jobs, rights and no hard border in Northern Ireland her priorities.

AM: And yet if you look at the Commons numbers the chances of getting what you want, which is to stay inside the customs union and the single market, look very, very unlikely, and indeed the possibility of a no deal exit looks quite likely. In those circumstances what should happen?

FO: Well, again we're very clear, time is running out and a crash out of the European Union would be an absolute disaster for the people that we represent, and we're not playing games here, this is about livelihoods at BMW, Airbus, Jag, people are worried about their futures. What the Prime Minister should be doing now is seeking an extension on Article 50 so that we don't crash out in

March and we get the time to negotiate a deal that puts working people first for a change.

AM: There's a poll in today's Observer on the front page, of the three biggest trade unions, showing overwhelming support for a second referendum, or so-called people's vote. Is that going to become the TUC policy as well?

FO: Well, I want to serve notice to the Prime Minister today that if we don't get the deal that working people need then the TUC will be throwing our full weight behind a campaign for a popular vote so that people get a say on whether that deal is good enough or not. Because, you know, I'm a trade unionist, there is no way a trade unionist would negotiate a deal and not go back to their members. We know that people want a say, that they don't trust politicians, they're really worried about what Brexit means for their jobs, their industries, their communities and their wage packets and prices going up too. So it's only right that people should get a say. So if the Prime Minister can't come back with a deal that meets our need, we'll be campaigning for a popular vote.

AM: But as you say, time is running out and this can only happen if MPs vote for it, including Labour MPs. Jeremy Corbyn said this week, 'we don't have a policy on that yet.' So what's your message to Jeremy Corbyn?

FO: Well, I think Labour have left all options on the table, and I have to say that the difference with Labour is that they've said they want to put jobs first too, and that it can't be about making workers' rights worse. Now, we haven't had any of those guarantees from the government. People are worried about what this means for their families. But the sensible thing to do immediately to avoid that crashing out in March is for the Prime Minister to seek an extension to Article 50 so that we get the time to get these talks back on track and start focusing on the things that matter.

AM: (talking over)

FO: Well, I think she should. I mean, it is sensible again in any negotiation it's sensible to get more time.

AM: And if not, back to the people?

FO: Absolutely. The people should have a say.

AM: Because of course there's lots of your members, lots of Unison and GMB and Unite union members who voted to leave the EU and they would be very upset if that happened. Barry Gardiner, who's a shadow cabinet minister, said: 'that would lead to social disruption, civil disobedience, voters would feel we were playing with our democracy, playing with the foundations of our country in a way that is really, really damaging.'

F: Look, I think for many people that vote on the referendum wasn't an easy decision. But we're not talking about unravelling that vote, what we're talking about is the terms of the deal and whether or not they do what the government first promised, which was that they would protect jobs, they would protect livelihoods, they would protect workers' rights. Well, we haven't see the evidence of it, and until we do we're saying that ordinary people should get a say on the terms of that deal and be able to vote on whether they're good enough.

AM: And to be clear, a say on the terms of that deal, would that include a say to stay inside the EU and therefore unravel the first referendum or not?

FO: We're focused on the terms of the deal. That's what matters. But I have to say, you know, I'm not a constitutional expert, I never say never. But what matters to us is protecting people's jobs. We think that if we stayed in the single market and the customs union like Norway has stayed in the EEA, then that would be, you know, good enough. That would be the best way to

protect people's livelihoods. Again, you know, Theresa May tied herself up in red lines, made a mess of the negotiations. Frankly, I think trust in the government to deliver a good deal is nose-diving. So we've got find a sensible way through this. As I say, we should extend Article 50, we should focus on getting a deal that's actually good for this country, and that means good for working people. But if the Prime Minister is not prepared to do that, then I think it has to go back to the people. And if there isn't going to be an early general election the only way is a popular vote.

AM: Now, of course you'd like an early general election, and much of what you want to see in society depends upon their being a Labour government. But at the moment, over the summer it has been red on red, it's been an internal Tory (sic) war and so many Labour MPs either seem more concerned about attacking the leadership or the leadership's attacking them. What's your general message to the Labour Party ahead of their conference?

FO: Well, I don't like lecturing any other organisation.

AM: Go on.

FO The TUC – (laugh) given the chance. Well, what I would say is this: I don't think working people would forgive any party that spent more time looking at its own rules or obsessed with its own rows than actually fighting for them. I think, you know, we've got – the average worker now is still £13 a week worse off than they were before the crash. People are fed up with zero hours contracts, they're fed up with insecurity, we've got no proper industrial policy. People want a bit of attention. People want politicians to be focused on real working lives and making them better and doing something about making Britain a better place. So I think my message to any politician, of any stripe, is if all you're talking about yourselves you will lose the support of voters. And it's all there to fight for, but you know, stick to the bread and butter that people care about. And people are worried about their jobs.

AM: And if we hadn't been talking about Brexit, because we always are, we'd probably have been talking about the changing economy and AI and the Gig economy, we're in a world now where it's much, much harder for trade unionists to organise. There aren't the old fashioned factory floor meetings and office groups and so forth – well, not so much of that. What has to happen to the trade union movement in this new fast-changing, more automated, disconcerting economy to keep trade unionism alive?

FO Well, we're still nearly six million strong, of course, in terms of membership. But I'm not complacent about that. We've got to find new ways. In a digital economy we need digital trade unionism, for example. But we have got some fantastic campaigns. I mean, who would have believed that we'd have low paid workers at McDonalds out on strike against zero hours contracts, for guaranteed hours. Who'd have thought TGI Fridays would be on strike around tips and who gets to hold those tips? So, you know we've – Ryanair we've just won our recognition agreement. So we're still there, standing by the side of working people, and in some ways it's not that different to what the pioneers did when people were hired at the factory gates day by day. But we're still fighting, still winning.

AM: Alright. 150 years on, Frances O'Grady thanks very much indeed for talking to us.

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