

Amicus research

Industrial report 2004

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Section 1

Amicus Policy 2004

Amicus – Policy

It is possible to summarise the policy of Amicus in that Amicus members want a progressive policy agenda combining economic, employment and social policies to provide economic stability and social justice, improve living standards for all, and meet the challenges of the competitive global economy.

The key aspirations for Amicus members are to have job security in a decent, safe and fairly paid job with rights and dignity at work and the ability to improve their skills, balance working time with other commitments and to retire on a secure and decent pension.

Summarised here is the Amicus policy on many of the key issues and events in the world of work. It is not a complete compendium of Amicus policy; it is a report on the overall policy approach of the Union.

Employment rights

There is still no right to protection from unfair dismissal until employees have been employed for a year. While the Labour Government has delivered on a range of new employment rights, we remain concerned at the level of redundancy pay and the law concerning companies that go into administration. Amicus has long been concerned with the growth of temporary and agency labour and 'bogus self employment'. Amicus has consistently called for a level playing field in Europe on employment rights. Amicus is also concerned that the new disciplinary and grievance procedures under the Employment Act 2002 must not prevent an employee's right to a fair hearing at an employment tribunal.

Pensions

The crisis in pensions, with final salary pension schemes being closed to new members or wound up entirely, has been a key campaign for Amicus. The pensions bill is currently passing through the legislative process. The bill contains a Government proposal for a pension protection fund; Amicus has been campaigning to ensure it has power to make retrospective payments. There is still a need to make pensions fully recognised as being 'pay' and under the contract of employment. There is also a need to ensure employers make minimum 10% contributions with employees making 5% contributions to pension schemes and end the practice of employer contribution holidays.

Amicus believes that there should be tax changes to make occupational pension funds cheaper and has urged the Government to consider either the restoration of Advance Corporation Tax relief or an alternative measure to boost the investment return on pension contributions and a refocusing of tax support on lower levels of contributions. Amicus believes that the state pension is an essential element of

pension provision in the UK. There remains a key concern for alleviating poverty in retirement, in particular for women who often live longer than men and also are less likely to have paid sufficient national insurance contributions to qualify for the state pension.

Manufacturing

The Government is currently reviewing the DTI manufacturing strategy, procurement policy and innovation policy. Amicus believes a strong manufacturing sector is the backbone of all successful economies; we need a manufacturing strategy with the Government bringing together business and unions to save manufacturing and defend British jobs. Amicus has campaigned to highlight the plight of manufacturing, saying that the decline of the UK's manufacturing sector is reaching a critical point and, if allowed to continue, will threaten the futures of entire communities in industrial heartlands. Amicus has held successful national and regional demonstrations to highlight the plight of manufacturing. Amicus wants the UK to follow the best practices of our European partners to support manufacturing so British business can compete on a level playing field. Amicus is campaigning for the introduction of stronger employment protection and greater investment in research and development and skills and training to boost UK manufacturing productivity and make redundancies a more difficult and expensive option.

Full employment

Amicus has fully supported the Government's commitment to full employment and we believe the Government must also work towards the goal of full employment in every region, intervene where rapid and severe job losses take place due to industrial restructuring and help prevent job losses through an active industrial policy.

The economy

Amicus has raised concerns that the Monetary Policy Committee decisions on interest rates have not taken sufficiently into account the need to support manufacturing industry. Amicus believes that the remit of the committee should be widened to take account of regional and sectoral impacts of their decisions on interest rates.

Offshoring

Amicus is concerned at the pressure that business is coming under to outsource jobs overseas, particularly in the service sector. Amicus believes that offshoring is having a damaging impact on the UK's skills base as well as the ethical concerns we have raised. As an internationalist organisation Amicus is committed to raising labour standards at home and abroad. Amicus welcomes the development of

emerging economies and accepts the reality of globalisation. However, we believe that employers must recognise the wider social and economic impact of their decisions.

Europe

Amicus has a pro European policy. While Amicus has supported a referendum on the single currency we have also raised the need to reform the stability and growth pact and its implementation of the convergence criteria set under the Maastricht treaty. Amicus wants the Government to deliver the European social agenda, the charter of fundamental rights under the draft constitution and deal with the implications of enlargement. We need to end the practice of mass job losses when plants close simply because British workers are cheaper and easier to sack than their European counterparts.

High performance workplaces

Britain must compete in the global marketplace on the basis of high performance workplaces where employees are involved in innovation and the decision making process and where we seek to improve productivity through a culture of long term investment, skills and high quality production.

Information and consultation

The Government has agreed a social partnership agreement between the TUC and CBI on the implementation of the information and consultation in to UK law. Amicus has developed our industrial strategy with regards to the implementation of the draft regulations in terms of protecting and extending our collective bargaining influence in the work place, the opportunities for recruitment and organisation, and the education and support that Amicus representatives will require as they deal with a range of complex business and economic information.

Working Hours

Amicus is campaigning for a 35-hour week without loss of pay. We are persuading employers that competitiveness does not depend on our members working longer hours than any other workers do in Europe. In fact all available research shows that reducing working hours increases overall productivity. Amicus is also campaigning to end the UK opt out of the Working Time Directive.

Work-Life balance

The Employment Act 2002 introduced the right to request flexible working. Amicus is campaigning for flexible working hours to help enable our members reconcile their work with their family life and women in particular to participate in the labour market.

Childcare

Amicus welcomed the child tax credit and has long campaigned for workplace childcare. Amicus is concerned with the lack of access to high quality affordable childcare, in particular for those members who work non-standard hours or have children with special needs.

Corporate manslaughter

Amicus believes it is essential to reduce the number of fatalities at work and this will only come about when those companies that have caused deaths through negligence are held to account. The Government is expected to announce a draft bill imminently, which will introduce a new offence to enable successful prosecutions of companies whose failure to set or maintain standards causes a death. Amicus has held many events to highlight the corporate manslaughter campaign in particular around Workers Memorial Day and works closely with the Centre for Corporate Accountability and Hazards to campaign for a change in the law.

Skills

Amicus has welcomed the Government Skills white paper that provided the new structural framework for unions, the Government and employers to work together to deliver skills. The Union Learning Fund and Union Learning Representatives have delivered many learning opportunities to our members, however, Amicus believes that learning should also be integrated into the mainstream collective bargaining agenda under recognition legislation.

Amicus believes there must be an extension in provision of modern apprenticeships. While we are strongly supportive of the Government's Employer Training Pilots, we regret the absence of a statutory right to paid time off for vocational education for all workers from the White Paper and the decision to evaluate the pilots before introducing such a right.

The welfare system

Poverty and deprivation causes lasting damage to people, families and whole communities. Amicus wants people to be supported to escape poverty through an inclusive modern welfare system. The root causes of poverty must be tackled through redistribution of wealth to close the widening gap between rich and poor using measures such as the national minimum wage, progressive taxation and decent levels of universal state benefits.

Public services

Amicus believes that access to high quality, modern public services widens opportunities for people, is the engine that delivers equality and provides the infrastructure that supports communities and the economy. Amicus wants a Government that is committed to investing in our public services and providing for all a decent health service, housing, education, childcare and an integrated transport system.

Amicus recognises that reform is needed to improve public service delivery, but believe this will not be achieved at the expense of public sector workers' security of employment. Where public services have been privatised, workers' wages and conditions have suffered causing a negative impact on the quality of service delivered. Amicus believes that the Government's two-tier workforce agreement should be extended to cover all areas of public services. It is essential to get the balance right of how the public sector engages with the private and voluntary sectors to ensure that workers, the public and the taxpayer receive the best possible deal through well funded, publicly owned, publicly accountable, modern public services.

Corporate social responsibility

Businesses that operate in the UK have a responsibility to the environment and society that are wider than shareholder interests. Amicus wants business regulation and legislation so that we can ensure businesses meet the minimum standards of corporate social responsibility and ensure all 'stakeholders' are valued.

Equal pay

Equal pay has been agreed as a priority campaign for Amicus. There are many gains to be made through the Amicus industrial strategy, and the support that will be required by officers and working representatives. Amicus has also highlighted the discrimination in pay on the grounds of race, sexual orientation, disability and age. We have yet to see the change in the Equal Pay Act that will require employers to carry out equal pay audits.

Single Equalities Act

The Government intends to create a single equalities commission to replace the EOC, DRC and RRC. Amicus is concerned that the single equalities commission will require additional resources to promote equality in relation to age, sexuality and religion, as well as continue work in the areas of sex equality, race and disability. Amicus believes that a single equality body may well be a longer-term progressive step, particularly in the many cases where individuals experience multiple discrimination, but in particular, this must not be at the expense of many

years of work and campaigning on disability rights, and the sidelining of the Disability Task Force recommendations. Amicus believes there should be a single Equalities Act that deals with all areas of discrimination and modernises our legislation and can adequately ensure that the single equalities commission has legally enforceable powers.

Trade union rights

Britain still has some of the most restrictive trade union legislation in the Western world. Working people should have the right to join and take collective industrial action through their trade union whatever the size of their workplace. Amicus members should be able to organise industrially and politically without the burden of legislation that has been designed to obstruct or frustrate legitimate trade union activity. The employment bill that is currently before parliament was disappointing in that it failed to address many of Amicus's concerns. There are a number of amendments that will clarify the CAC procedures for statutory recognition and the right for trade unions to exclude members from far-Right organisations.

Recruitment and organisation

Amicus has a strong commitment to recruitment and organisation and has won many recognition agreements since the implementation on the Employment Relations Act. Amicus also recognises the changing nature of the workplace means that there are often individual or smaller groups of members. As a union, Amicus provides its representatives with the training, development and protection of the Union to perform duties effectively. Amicus has a strong tradition in supporting union organisation in the workplace and believes that strong collective bargaining structures are central to defending members' terms and conditions.

Citizenship and an inclusive democracy

Amicus wants a more inclusive democracy in Britain with membership-based political parties. Amicus is opposed to restricting funding to state funding. Amicus believes in the first past the post system for elections, we want our representatives in Parliament, local government and regional assemblies to be democratically elected, and reflect the diversity of our nation. We want reform of the European institutions to make them accountable and democratic.

Amicus wants active citizenship and respect for all people who live in our country. Amicus wants our Government to build cohesive communities that celebrate our ethnic and cultural diversity and citizenship based on respect for fundamental human rights for all. Amicus is particularly concerned at the recent electoral success of far-Right political organisations and is committed to working with the wider community to campaign against racist propaganda that divides our communities.

Globalisation

Globalisation affects our lives as citizens as well as at work. Many people in Britain work for trans-national companies. The Government must engage with corporations and international bodies in a dialogue over workers' rights, social issues and the responsibilities of globalisation. Along with global markets we are part of a global community and want our global institutions to reflect the social dimension through reform of the World Trade Organisation, World Bank and IMF so that there is greater transparency and democracy within their operations.

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Section 2

Amicus and the food, drink and tobacco industries

Food and Drink

Industry facts:

- The food and drink manufacturing industry is the single largest manufacturing sector in the UK, with a turnover of £66 billion, accounting for 14.3% of the total manufacturing sector.
- Amicus represents over 19,000 members in the food, drink and tobacco industries, predominantly in the maintenance function. Recognition agreements exist for distribution and production workers across various sites.
- The industry employs some 500,000 people, representing around 13% of the UK manufacturing workforce.
- Exports are valued at around £9 billion for food and drink, over 60% of which goes to EU members.
- Total imports are around £18 billion for food and drink, of which 64% comes from EU members.
- The industry buys two-thirds of all the UK's agricultural produce.

Trends and challenges

The food and drink manufacturing industry is intensely competitive and has been subject to a major squeeze on profitability. The industry has consolidated in recent years through mergers and acquisitions and the trend is towards fewer and larger businesses in both manufacturing and retailing. The takeover battle for Safeways demonstrates the process of consolidation taking place, which will leave very few companies dominating retail and manufacturing.

As part of the global supply chain, if the industry is to thrive it must be competitive internationally. As the EU enlarges, the issue of the location of future investment from multinational companies and its effect on UK jobs will be increasingly important. The FDT NIC continues to work against the transfer of production to lower wage economies.

- **Food safety**

CJD continues to cast its shadow over the food industry, as a result of which consumers' confidence in the safety of food was badly shaken. In an attempt both to restore faith in the safety of food and prevent similar disasters recurring a raft of stringent safety and hygiene regulations have been introduced at both UK and European levels, as well as the Government establishing the Food Standards Agency.

The outbreak of foot and mouth disease in 2001 dealt a second blow to meat producers. Scepticism became outright hostility when genetically modified food appeared on the menu and the Government took immediate action on food labelling and GMO food trials as a result. Nevertheless, interest in organic food has grown. The food industry argues that with the newly introduced regulations and controls, food is safer than it has ever been. Amicus has been instrumental in supporting the industry throughout these difficult times.

- **Sustainable development**

The 'social responsibility' element of the industry is not new but has been brought into much sharper focus lately as one of the many strands of the current sustainability debate.

The continuing negotiations on the reform of the Common Agriculture Policy are vital to ensure a way forward for food production in Europe which is more sustainable. Amicus has submitted its proposals to the Government on how the CAP might be reviewed and modernised, most recently with regard to the sugar sector in which the need to support the future of quality rural jobs was underlined.

- **Employment, terms and conditions**

The overall level of employment in the food, drink and tobacco manufacturing industry has remained relatively stable over the last decade, with the number of jobs remaining around the half million mark. While employment has fallen slightly, it has held up well against the scale of redundancies in the manufacturing sector as a whole.

Amicus has recently carried out a detailed survey of shop stewards across the FDT industries covering pay, conditions and agreements. It recognises that reductions in the size of workforces have taken place. As far as redundancy payments are concerned, the NIC has led a successful campaign in highlighting the shortcomings of the redundancy cap, including a lobby of parliament and the reading of a 10 minute rule bill. This campaign is set to continue.

At the same time demand for workers, both skilled and unskilled, exceeds supply in many areas, with the replacement of highly skilled workers a key concern. That said the take-up rate of apprentices remains low throughout the industry. The NIC has noted its keenness in running an information campaign to try and increase the number of apprentices across the FDT sector.

- **Membership and industry mapping**

As part of a campaign to retain and recruit new members in the FDT sector, a mapping exercise was undertaken as part of a national organising project for the union. Surveys of workplaces revealed that workplace representatives were often undervalued and a strategy for communicating and promoting their efforts and achievements was developed. This has proved successful and amongst other things has highlighted the question of contribution rates for retired members and apprentices and the relationship with membership retention. Members of the NIC have piloted a strategy for identifying membership levels and potential for growth.

- **Changing shift patterns**

Greater availability through extended shop opening hours is a consumer demand that the industry has taken on board. But, with pressure intensifying on food manufacturers to deliver fresh food to supermarkets during unsocial hours, many employers in sectors such as baking have made significant changes to their working time arrangements in order to meet these demands. Annualised hours systems or replacing traditional overtime payments with flat-rate payments for hours worked over, say, 39 hours a week have been common ways of delivering round-the-clock production and simultaneously complying with the Working Time Regulations. The future of the opt-out agreement for the Working Time Regulations remains an issue of concern and a workplace campaign was run at the initiative of NIC members to inform members of forthcoming changes to the regulations.

Tobacco

Industry facts:

The UK tobacco industry:

- Is dominated by the three multinational manufacturing companies: British American Tobacco, Gallaher and Imperial Tobacco all with divisions manufacturing cigarettes, pipe tobacco and handrolling tobacco within the UK.
- Employs over 6,500 people directly in the UK.
- Supports over 100,000 indirect jobs in the UK.
- Contributes tax revenue of £10 billion.
- Exports goods worth £984 million.
- Is a top 10 contributor to the UK's balance of trade.
- Contributes a further £550 million in income tax, corporation tax and rates.

Trends and challenges

- **European tobacco control directive**

In December 2002 the UK began implementing the EU Directive on Tobacco Control, which contains legislation that will ban the export of cigarettes above 10mg tar outside of the EU and also bans descriptors such as low, light and mild. Many Amicus members played an active part in the Tobacco Workers' Alliance campaign against the manufacturing clause of the Directive. Together we have managed to secure a delay on the export ban to the latest date specified in the terms of the Directive. This allows exports to continue up until 2007.

The cigarette manufacturers appear to have begun restructuring in preparation for the 2007 deadline. Production of cigarettes over 10mg tar for markets outside the EU is already being moved abroad.

The European Commission is set to report on the progress of the Tobacco Control Directive during 2004. There is scope within the Directive for further controls on tobacco products that are manufactured and marketed within the EU. The TWA is monitoring the situation.

- **Rationalisation**

There is a trend towards rationalisation of products within all tobacco companies, with the aim that any product could be manufactured in any site across the globe. This will inevitably lead to reviews of unit production costs and put pressure on UK workers, compared to those in low wage economies.

- **Employment, terms and conditions**

Successful negotiations have been concluded with all major companies within the Industry on pay and terms and conditions of employment throughout the year. In all cases there have been improvements, including above-inflation increases on basic salaries.

The Tobacco Control Directive was a major factor in the current closure of BAT's Rothmans factory in Darlington with the loss of 500 jobs and the knock-on effects on the local economy and supply industries throughout the UK. All major manufacturers have

announced job cuts in the past year and the union has played an active role in the redundancy negotiations.

- **Tobacco smuggling**

Smuggled tobacco products still account for over 20 per cent of the market, which threatens members' jobs. There has been a decline in smuggling resulting from closer co-operation between the UK manufacturers and Customs and Excise. However, this has led to counterfeit products having an increased share in the smuggled market. Members are participating in the TWA lobby of the Treasury to freeze or cut duty on cigarettes and bring the cost of cigarettes more in line with EU partners, reducing the incentive for smuggling. This is of particular concern considering the extension of the EU's borders in May 2004 to include 10 Central and Eastern European countries.

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Section 3

Economic overview 2004

Introduction

The UK economy has remained stable and strong over the past year with steady interest rates and low inflation. Although there was a sluggish start to 2003 in terms of growth, with many City analysts suggesting the Treasury figures were too optimistic, the economy recovered and grew to meet the Chancellor's forecast of 2-2.5%. The UK economy has shown more resilience in weathering the downturn than any other major European economy. In the last three months of 2003, the economy expanded at its fastest rate in almost three years. Growth targets of 3-3.5% have been set for 2004-05, indicating a positive outlook from the Treasury. This forecast was recently supported by Ernst & Young who are predicting 3% growth this year and possibly 4.75% next year.

The key to greater growth is often seen as dependent on recovery in the global market, particularly the US market. Towards the end of the year, the US began to show signs of recovery with 8% growth in the third quarter. This success has been at the expense of increasing deficits, making it increasingly difficult for the US to be able to balance its books, resulting in a weak currency. In the past year, the dollar has declined 21% against the euro and is at its lowest level against the pound since 1992. The expected knock-on effect for the UK from US growth may be limited, as the weak dollar damages the European export market. In addition, the World Trade Organisation has expressed concern that the US trade deficit could give rise to increasingly protectionist measures.

The level of UK Government borrowing has increased to £37bn for 2003-04, £10bn more than predicted in last year's Budget. The Chancellor points to increased spending in Iraq as a contributory factor to greater levels of borrowing. However, this increase in borrowing still meets the 'golden rule,' which says the Government should not borrow for current spending over the whole economic cycle, and gives the UK a lower deficit than other major economies such as Germany, the USA, and Japan. Public sector net debt is projected to be low and stable over the next five years, stabilising at 35.2% of GDP and well below the 40% ceiling set in the sustainable investment rule.

Interest rates

2003 interest rates continued to have a major impact on industry, particularly in terms of European export levels. For the 14th month in succession, interest rates were held at 4% in January 2003. Employers and trade unionists welcomed February's 0.25% cut. A key factor in the Bank of England's decision for this cut at the start of the year was the news that factory production fell by 4% in 2002, the largest annual slump since 1991.

In a measure to boost industry and growth, a further cut of 0.25% in July brought interest rates down to 3.5%, a level not seen since 1955, and established Mervyn Peake's position as the new Governor of the Bank of England. However, this rate was short lived as in November interest rates returned to 3.75% following concerns that consumer debt and house prices were rising too rapidly. In January 2004, interest rates remained at 3.75% but many analysts predict a rise in Spring if the economy looks strong in early 2004.

Inflation: RPI, RPIX, CPI

Inflation has fluctuated over 2003 but has always remained within 1% of the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee's target figure of 2.5%. Both the RPI and the RPIX, which excludes mortgage interest payments, closed the year on target at 2.5%, although there have been concerns that house price inflation is the biggest driver of price increases in the RPI. In November's Pre-Budget Report, the Chancellor confirmed that the Bank of England would replace the RPIX with the Consumer Price Index (CPI), believed to be a key part of the UK's preparation for entry to the single currency as countries in the eurozone already use this measurement. The target CPI is 2% and the January 2004 level is 1.3%.

The difference in RPIX and CPI raises some issues. Some commentators are suggesting that the low level of CPI encourages an interest rate cut but the Bank of England may wait to see if the gap between CPI and RPIX narrows before adjusting the interest rate. The Government has given reassurance that payment of benefits will continue to be indexed to the RPI, but there is concern over which inflation measure the public sector will be expected to use as a shift to CPI could hold down wages. The TUC is pursuing this issue.

National Insurance

The 1% increase in National Insurance, announced in the 2002 Budget, came into effect in April last year. The Government made clear that this increase is to fund investment in the health service. Opponents of the Government argued that the 1p in the pound NI rise was a tax on business that threatened jobs. However, there does not appear to be any evidence to support this. For business, the rise only restored the contribution to a similar level to what it was in April 2000 prior to the cut that they received to offset the climate change and aggregates levy. Also, independent economic research undertaken for the OECD has demonstrated that there is no link between levels of employment and payroll tax. UK spending on the NHS will increase by an average of 7.1% a year in real terms over the five years to 2007-08.

Trade Deficit

Trade figures at the close of the year confirmed that the strong pound and the weak dollar is adding to the UK's trade deficit, which currently stands at £3.3 billion for goods and services, and at £4.4 billion for goods alone. Lower imports of oil were offset across the board by falls in exports to leave the deficit with non-EU countries unchanged at £2.3 billion. The deficit with the EU widened slightly to £2.1 billion as a result of higher imports of semi-manufactured goods towards the end of the year, in particular paper and paperboard. Within exports to the EU, lower exports of oil were offset by higher exports of a range of manufactured goods. The surplus on trade in services rose to £1.1 billion. The UK traditionally counterbalances its shortfall in trade in goods with a surplus in the supply of services, such as transport, banking, and insurance, to the rest of the world but this is being challenged by an increase in offshoring in the financial sector.

The UK's export performance continues to suffer from difficult trading conditions, particularly in Europe. Although the trade deficit is concerning for the economy, and there are concerns that it is set to widen, the deficit has largely been stable through what have been difficult circumstances. In comparing the UK with the US, analyst Alan Castle, of Lehman Brothers, states: "Overall we have limited concerns over the UK trade and current account deficit compared with the US."

Labour Market Trends

A TUC report on labour market trends 1992-2002, published in the summer, concluded that key areas of working conditions have improved over this period. Compared with the previous five years, 74% more jobs have been created since the Labour Government was elected in 1997 but, perhaps more surprisingly, in contrast to the mainly temporary and part time jobs created between 1992 and 1997, the jobs created since 1997 have been permanent with nearly two-thirds of them full time. Since 1997 fewer people are working in either very long hour jobs (above 45 hours) or very short hour jobs (under 16 hours). All the increases in job numbers have been in the middle range part time and full time jobs with average weekly hours of between 16 and 45 hours. This reverses the trend pre-1997 where most of the increase in jobs was coming from those working in excess of 45 hours a week.

The report also concluded that wages have improved. Although partly fuelled by inflated wages at the higher end of the scale, average wages have grown faster since 1997 and, after years of under funding of the public sector, the gap between public and private sector pay has closed significantly. Over the last three years, the public sector average earnings index has increased by 15.9%, which is 4.8% more than the private sector.

Sector comparisons

Significant variations in pay across sectors look set to continue. Although 3% was the common increase last year, there were pay freezes in parts of the electronics sector, while increases of 5 to 7% were not uncommon in construction. The car industry saw increases of 3.5 to 4%, while settlement levels in other parts of engineering were stagnant at 2.5%. Some sectors are increasingly using comparative market data in pay offers and awards, with evidence from the finance sector suggesting that an employee's position in the pay band relative to a market rate carries more weight in pay determination, while in the utilities sector, the use of market rates is widespread. The uncertainty in the manufacturing sector, and the rising skills shortages in other sectors, is expected to lead to further diversity in settlements.

The euro

In June, in an assessment of the five economic tests for joining the single currency, the Chancellor announced that only one, which evaluates the impact on financial services, had been met. The Chancellor did confirm that progress on passing two of the tests – on economic flexibility and convergence with the eurozone – would lead to the remaining two tests being satisfied. In his Pre-Budget report, Gordon Brown announced the publication of a paving Bill which includes a proposed referendum question: 'Should the United Kingdom adopt the euro as its currency?'

The euro has had a fairly turbulent early history, with a record low of \$0.84 in September 2000. However, at the close of 2003 it reached its highest level of \$1.20 against the weakening dollar, seen as evidence that the Euro is robust enough to ride out concerns about political factors interfering with the currency's launch criteria. Fears about economic growth in the eurozone area prompted the European Central Bank (ECB) to cut interest rates by 0.5% to 2% in June, where it has remained.

The latest eurozone economic data showed the region's recovery is continuing, but at a slow pace. The ECB has forecast growth will be between 1.1% and 2.1% in 2004, double its best expectations of 0.6% in 2003.

From the 2003 Pre-Budget report, Amicus welcomed announcements that:

- There will be a new framework of incentives for small firms
- Tax relief will be enhanced to encourage businesses to invest in North Sea oil exploration
- Tax credits for research and development will be widened
- The windfall tax reserve, previously used for job creation, will now be used to fund training pilots, in an effort to boost skills
- For the first time, full employment plans for each region of the country will be published
- Employers will be able to give staff a tax-free £50 a week for childcare.

From the 2003 Budget Amicus welcomed:

- An additional £3 million committed to the Union Learning Fund up to 2005
- A deferred increase, in line with inflation, in the main road fuel duties from 1 October 2003
- A new Child Trust Fund giving every newborn child £250, or £500 for the poorest, ensuring that every child has money in the bank at the age of 18;
- Improved tax incentives to boost research and development and investment in information technology by small companies
- An extension of existing pilots to improve access to training among low-skilled people
- A 7.2% a year in real terms in UK spending on health up to 2007-08, putting the NHS on a sound long-term financial footing.

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