

Statement on Brexit by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions

The most striking aspect of the response of Europe's political leaders to the British referendum result is how they failed to get the message.

The simple fact of the matter is that the result of the referendum swung on working class voters suffering years of austerity and deregulated labour markets. These conditions originated in decisions taken at Westminster but Europe got the blame. The strategy of precarious work favoured by business and those on the centre right simply doesn't work; sooner or later the politics catches up with the economics.

The outcome of the referendum has energised the radical right across Europe and especially in the Netherlands, France and Italy towards winning political power on the back of similar referendums. They trade on a toxic mix of xenophobia, nationalism and outright lies. They are exploiting the abandonment of a social Europe envisaging prosperity for the many not just the few. If they succeed, these groups will drag us back to a Europe of contending nation states. The only European project worth defending is one which delivers for working class people across Europe.

Governments and the European Union (EU) need to abandon the policies pursued since 2009 of austerity and a race to the bottom and put in place a New Deal to generate growth and jobs. Without this, the collapse of the EU is inevitable. It's not simply a matter of austerity. It's a failure by the state to actively intervene in managing industrial restructuring. Only the EU is big enough to do that on a continental scale. Hence the need for massive infrastructure projects, a Marshall plan for Europe as proposed by our German counterpart, the Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (DGB)

The European Trade Union Confederation proposes a policy of investment in sustainable growth which would raise skills and productivity. Congress supports this. We also support the proposal by President Juncker to build a Pillar of European Social rights, and urges the Irish Government to do likewise.

Given its role in both Northern Ireland, Congress is especially conscious of the role of EU institutions in underpinning the Good Friday agreement, a binding treaty under international law. The references to the European institutions in this agreement arguably stand alone and are independent of UK membership of the EU. It behoves all actors involved in any negotiations to be mindful of this international agreement doubly endorsed by two referendums on the island of Ireland.

The negotiations on Brexit have already begun. Congress will be urging no concessions to Britain which will weaken the platform of social rights. Irish, British and European interests must be reconciled in this process. Our government must approach this from the perspective of building a better Europe rather than a narrow 'how do we manage Brexit' agenda. Pursuing the narrow agenda is a short term policy.

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