

All Island Forum on Brexit

Opening statement by Patricia King, Irish Congress of Trade Unions

The prospect of the UK leaving the European Union presents a once in a generation challenge for the Irish government, the Northern Ireland Executive and citizens across this island, a great majority of whom wish to remain within the EU.

We may be uncertain as to what form Brexit will finally take, but let there be no doubt of its potential to utterly reshape all parts of this island both economically and socially. The challenge we now face is to fashion a coherent, proactive response that serves the interests and welfare of all citizens, north and south.

Congress is the largest civil society body on the island, representing hundreds of thousands of working people in the public and private sectors.

Workers' Rights & Protections

Brexit must not become a pretext to dismantle hard won employment rights and standards derived from EU Directives. The standard reaction so far, from predictable quarters, is to use Brexit to argue for wage repression in certain sectors and movement towards ever lower personal and corporate taxes. In doing so they fail to focus on the high sectoral levels of productivity in Ireland and current low investment. We are calling on both Governments to ensure that we do not follow the UK in a race to the bottom in terms of social legislation and labour market conditions.

Jobs & Employment

Congress is calling on both governments to support the UK's continued membership of both the Single Market and the Customs Union. We are acutely conscious that some sectors of our economies are particularly exposed and in employment terms may well become vulnerable to job loss and displacement. We need to swiftly identify the 'at risk sectors'.

Building on this information, appropriate supports must be put in place to better equip companies and their workforces. We propose the establishment of an all-island '**early warning system**' inclusive of trade unions, employers and state agencies, together with a **Retraining Fund** to reskill workers for jobs in new sectors. The creation of a **Strategic Investment Bank** would help create new, post-Brexit enterprises and support firms affected by the UK's exit.

Over the medium term we need to plan to develop more innovative economies capable of carving our new markets and raising productivity levels and living standards across the regions. Now is the time to invest and build our infrastructure.

The Good Friday Agreement

It is imperative that the UK government reaffirms its commitment to the European Convention on Human Rights and we must also see an ongoing role for the EU in safeguarding this agreement. As enshrined in the Good Friday Agreement (GFA), the principle of consent underpins political and community life in Northern Ireland and governs relations between both parts of the island. Congress firmly believes this principle must be respected and upheld and that both the UK and Irish Governments must reaffirm their ongoing commitment to the maintenance of the GFA.

EU Funding

Given the high level of reliance on EU funding within certain sectors of Northern Irish economy, Congress is of the view that the UK Government must be obliged to guarantee the continuation of EU level funding for up to 15 years after the date of formal exit for the European Union. We believe both governments should support this position.

Free Movement of People

It is critical that we maintain free movement of people across the island. A hard Border must be avoided. This position must be supported by the governments in Dublin and Belfast.

ICTU Representation

Congress has a crucial role to play in any dialogue relating to Brexit given the major ramifications it may have for the workers we represent.

**Irish Congress of Trade Unions,
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