

**An address by SIPTU Deputy General Secretary, Gerry McCormack to the Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement on Thursday, 21<sup>st</sup> September, 2023**

Chairperson, members of the Committee. Firstly, I would like to thank you for the invitation to contribute the views of SIPTU, Ireland's largest trade union, with members across both jurisdictions on the island.

Our members have fully supported the Good Friday Agreement since it was endorsed by referendums in May 1998 and have consistently argued for its full implementation and indeed for its potential to be realised as intended by its architects and those who voted for it in such large numbers, North and South.

As has been stated by my colleague from Congress, there is no question but that the decision of the UK to leave the EU in 2016 has posed significant challenges to our members and workers across the economy. It is always worth reminding ourselves that 56% of voters in the North voted to remain in the EU and many of us warned of the potential disruption to supply chains, trade and employment in advance of the 2016 referendum. The trade union movement specifically warned of the challenges and divisions it could also cause for workers across the island.

There is no doubt, however, that the NI Protocol, which is a product of Brexit and not of the GFA, and the subsequent Windsor Framework, have mitigated much of the threat to jobs and trade that could otherwise have resulted from the UK withdrawal from the EU. The current absence of a functioning executive and other institutions set up under the GFA has resulted in significant hardship for our members and working people across the North, not least in the provision of vital public services.

The disruption, due to Brexit, of supply chains between the ROI and the UK has caused job losses, not least in the retail and transportation sector, and has contributed in no small way to the withdrawal of some UK based retailers from the Republic. It has also undoubtedly contributed to the cost-of-living crisis which has caused such hardship to working people over the past number of years. Migrant workers and others crossing the border for work or business have also been affected by Brexit and related barriers to the free movement of labour.

On the other hand, the development of the all-island economy has without question been boosted as trade, north and south, and vice versa has increased exponentially while trade routes from the island to Europe have also expanded and in some sectors, such as agri-food, compensated for the reduction of trade between the Republic and the UK.

As the general secretary of Congress stated in his opening remarks, Brexit has intensified the discussion on the prospect of constitutional change and referendums on unity in the not too distant future. SIPTU and the wider trade union movement has committed to engage in the necessary conversations, debate and preparation on what a new Ireland would mean and how workers can play a constructive part in its evolution.

We are concerned about the possible divergence in the conditions of employment and the rights of workers between North and South that could emerge from the partial implementation of the 'Adequate Minimum Wages Directive' proposed by the EU Commission. In this regard, we endorse the view expressed here by the Congress representatives that similar and comprehensive employment rights legislation should be introduced to ensure that workers in Northern Ireland enjoy the same benefits and protections.

Finally, I wish to express our support for the important work of this committee in protecting and advancing the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement.

Thank you