

## A new context: strengthening European trade union unity post-Brexit

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Many will want to use Brexit to divide the European trade union movement - our response must be to strengthen unity and solidarity.

The EU-UK agreement was signed on 30 December 2020, the UK finally left the European Union at the end of the transition period on 31 December 2020 with a deal. The transition period has ended, and the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement is (provisionally) applied.

The terms of the relationship between the UK and the EU has changed. But the conversation is far from over as Brexit will continue to impact all industrial and manufacturing sectors in both the UK and the EU-27, and there are many outstanding issues which will require further negotiations and agreement.

While a no-deal outcome would have been disastrous, there are numerous concerns about the impact of the deal on our sectors, different value chains, on jobs and employment rights. These include the increased regulatory burden for industry and the resurrection of non-tariff trade barriers, despite substantial provisions regarding the mutual recognition of standards, will likely have consequences in many companies and sectors.

We note with deep concern the rising tensions in relation to the implementation of the Northern Irish Protocol of the Withdrawal Agreement and the pressure to unilaterally change parts of the agreement by the UK government. Furthermore, many open questions remain given that the agreement is a bare-bones trade deal with further negotiations having to take place in a myriad of areas.

Over the last few years incredible solidarity has been demonstrated within the European labour movement in defining a common set of demands towards both sets of negotiators and with employers at all levels. Inevitably there is Brexit-fatigue after years of political wrangling.

Brexit has been in some ways a unique political process, as no other member state has exited the EU, but in other respects it is a symptom of wider attempts to fracture and divide the unity of European workers.

These divisions pose serious and significant challenges for the European trade union movement and therefore our starting point must be to reaffirm our commitment to solidarity and cooperation – we must not, and will not, allow political divisions between nation states and the EU to create divisions within the European trade union movement.

This cooperation will need new thinking about how we reorganize ourselves in the whole European trade union movement. Our European level organisations are the place where we build solidarity with workers and trade unions operating throughout Europe, not just in the EU.

Our organisations are European organisations not limited to EU matters and concerns – covering 38 countries.

Multinational companies and opportunistic governments will not hesitate to exploit and deepen divisions in their desire to drive down costs and labour standards, and as a European trade union movement we will respond to this by redoubling our efforts to deepen and strengthen solidarity and cooperation between European trade unions – the well-being of all the workers we represent depends on it.

European trade union federations have played a critical role in enhancing union coordination and cooperation in multinational companies and if we are to successfully oppose multinationals attempts to play workers off against each other in the future, then the need to reinforce this coordination and cooperation will increase not decrease.

It is clear that an attack on employment and union rights and standards is being prepared by the Government notably on employment rights gained through the UKs membership of the European Union.

Any reduction in these rights will not only be extremely detrimental for UK workers, but will also be an enormous threat to workers throughout Europe creating downward pressure and the threat of concession bargaining. Concerted efforts in early January in the UK and across the rest of Europe saw off the first attempt to deregulate workers' rights. We cannot be complacent and must be ready for the future attempts to weaken or reduce employment and union rights.

Despite the EU-UK commitment to maintain a 'level playing field' the procedures to enforce it contained in the agreement are extremely weak and complex to use. It is likely to be through traditional trade union coordination and action that we collectively defend our members' interests not through legal recourse.

It will require a reinforced determination and effort in practice, through closer dialogue and cooperation at all levels, to ensure that mobilisation is possible, and that pressure is placed on EU and UK political actors to defend UK and EU rights and standards. The only defence of existing rights and hope of improved mutual rights will be dependent on tight coordination between our trade unions, and the application of political pressure in the UK and within the EU27.

Our movement is built on the core principles of collectivism and solidarity, they have always been the bedrock of our European and wider international work and we hereby reaffirm our collective identity

within industriAll Europe and commitment to uphold these principles and strengthen our European trade union work to meet the challenges that lay ahead.

Therefore, industrial Europe will ensure that this engagement is integrated into the forthcoming Congress in June 2021 and subsequent work programmes and action plans.