

Inquiry into EU reform and the EU referendum: implications for Scotland

STUC

The STUC is Scotland's trade union centre. Its purpose is to co-ordinate, develop and articulate the views and policies of the trade union movement in Scotland; reflecting the aspirations of trade unionists as workers and citizens.

The STUC represents over 590,000 working people and their families throughout Scotland. It speaks for trade union members in and out of work, in the community and in the workplace. Our affiliated organisations have interests in all sectors of the economy and our representative structures are constructed to take account of the specific views of women members, young members, Black/Minority Ethnic (BME) members, LGBT members, and members with a disability, as well as retired and unemployed workers.

The STUC is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this enquiry. It should be noted that the STUC is in the process of determining its policy with regard to the European referendum. At present the STUC holds policy in favour of the European Union but with a number of concerns around how the project currently functions for workers. The STUC is in favour of holding a referendum on the EU and will further develop our policy in this area at STUC Congress 2016, taking into account the status and/or outcome of the UK's negotiations with regard to its relationship with the EU.

What are your views on the implications of the EU Referendum Bill in relation to the timing of the referendum, the franchise for the referendum and the question to be put to the electorate?

The STUC has policy in favour of holding a referendum on Europe. The policy was passed at STUC Congress in 2014 and states clearly that a referendum is necessary in the interests of democracy. The resolution also clearly stated that in the event of a 'yes' vote in the Scottish independence referendum, a referendum on Scotland's membership of the EU should have been held.

While the STUC has no specific policy in relation to the timing of the referendum, we do not believe that it is appropriate to hold the referendum at the same time as another election, for example the Scottish Parliament elections or the Local Government elections. We also believe that the UK Government should leave sufficient time between the conclusion of the negotiations with other EU states around British membership and the referendum vote, to allow for scrutiny of the agreed new package and a robust public debate.

It is important that the question used in the EU referendum meets the Electoral Commission's standards and is impartial and easily understood by the electorate.

With regard to the franchise, the STUC holds policy in favour of votes for 16 and 17 year olds and would like to see the franchise extended in all elections, including the EU referendum.

What does EU membership mean for Scotland's economy and its people? What are the implications for Scotland of the UK leaving the European Union?

The implications for Scotland of either remaining within the EU or leaving the EU depend on the shape and structure of the EU and the UK's relationship to it. The Prime Minister is currently trying to renegotiate the UK's relationship with the European Union and these negotiations are likely to focus on issues such as access to UK benefits for other EU Citizens, the principle of freedom of movement, and workers rights and protections.

Currently the STUC has no policy with regard to whether it should support a 'leave' or 'remain' campaigning position in the European referendum. At present the STUC does hold policy in favour of the European project generally but with a number of caveats with regard to how the union functions.

The key to trade unions' support for the European project is the existence of a 'social Europe.' To date the European Union has secured useful social protections within the workplace including rights for women, rights for part-time, temporary and agency workers, rights in situations of redundancy and information and consultation, rights for working parents and a range of health and safety rights, including limitations on excessive hours and the creation of a work-life balance.

Difficulties for trade unions with the European project tend to focus on the EU's competition policy and the privatising agenda that the European Commission pursues. Continued attacks on collective bargaining and poor judgements from the European Court of Justice that allow for the undercutting of terms of conditions by European workers, cause problems for our movement and reflect the right leaning political make-up of institutions at a European level.

Despite this Europe can still act as a backstop for rights that are often under threat from our own UK Government. With the outcome to the Prime Minister's renegotiation of the UK's relationship with Europe unknown, it is difficult to be certain about the balance that the UK is likely to see between social protections and the neo-liberal ethos going forward. In this respect it is difficult to fully assess the implications of remaining or leaving the EU at the current time.

What would be the process for leaving the EU, including: the legal process with the EU and within the UK; withdrawal from the single market and EU trade agreements; the ending of free movement of persons; and transition arrangements?

In the result of a vote to leave the EU, the UK would need to come to a new agreement with the EU about its relationship. There are various models that this might take and decisions about trade agreements, withdrawal from the common market and the status of UK citizens living across Europe or EU citizens living within the UK will be a matter for negotiation. As with Scottish independence, there is likely to be a lead in period before the constitutional change comes into force, where detailed negotiations can take place.