



Teacher Union Co-Operation

A report by
John O'Dowd
to ASTI, IFUT, INTO and TUI
Governing Bodies/Conferences
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Report Author

John O'Dowd is an independent consultant, facilitator and mediator. He is a former general secretary of the CPSU and former assistant general secretary of the ASTI. His website is www.johnodowd.com

1. INTRODUCTION

This report describes the discussion process that the four teacher unions - ASTI, IFUT, INTO and TUI - engaged in over the period October 2011 to February 2012 on the issue of closer co-operation. The report outlines the key findings from those discussions. It also charts a way forward for closer co-operation that takes account of the current common needs of the four unions as well as their individual needs. My task as the independent facilitator appointed to assist the unions in the discussion process was threefold: to help them to design a process that would be thorough and inclusive; to facilitate and report upon their discussions; and to analyse the outcomes from the discussions and recommend what next steps they might take towards closer co-operation.

2. BACKGROUND

During 2007/2008 the ASTI, the INTO and the TUI passed a common motion on closer co-operation at their annual conferences. IFUT adopted the motion through its Council which is a broad based representative group comprising representatives elected by each Branch of the Union. One of the unique features of the 2007/2008 motion was the inclusion for the first time in discussion on teacher unity of IFUT. In the past there had been discussions on closer co-operation between ASTI and TUI and between ASTI, INTO and TUI.

The motion stated that the four unions were committed to formal discussions with a view to formulating proposals for a Federated Teachers' and Lecturers' Union and to presenting these proposals to their annual conferences the following year. The idea of a federated structure was promoted because it was considered that the trade union and professional interests of the members of the four unions would be best served by formal co-operation in a federated structure and because it was also considered that the identify of each union could be best preserved within such a structure.

At the time, a number of issues were suggested as being appropriate for joint decision-making and action by the four unions. These included: the Teaching Council;

membership financial benefits such as car plans; relations with ICTU, EU, OECD, EI and ETUCE; trade union training; health and safety; pensions; and equality. It was envisaged that there would be a 'management council' drawn from representatives of the four unions and that there would be a need for some staff on either a secondment or direct employment basis.

In 2008 the country was officially in recession and the government set about making significant cost savings through attacks on public service expenditure including teachers' and lecturers' jobs, pay and conditions. Over the past few years the attentions of the four unions were strongly focussed on defending members' pay and conditions of employment. For that reason, the discussions provided for in the 2007/2008 motion were delayed until mid-2011.

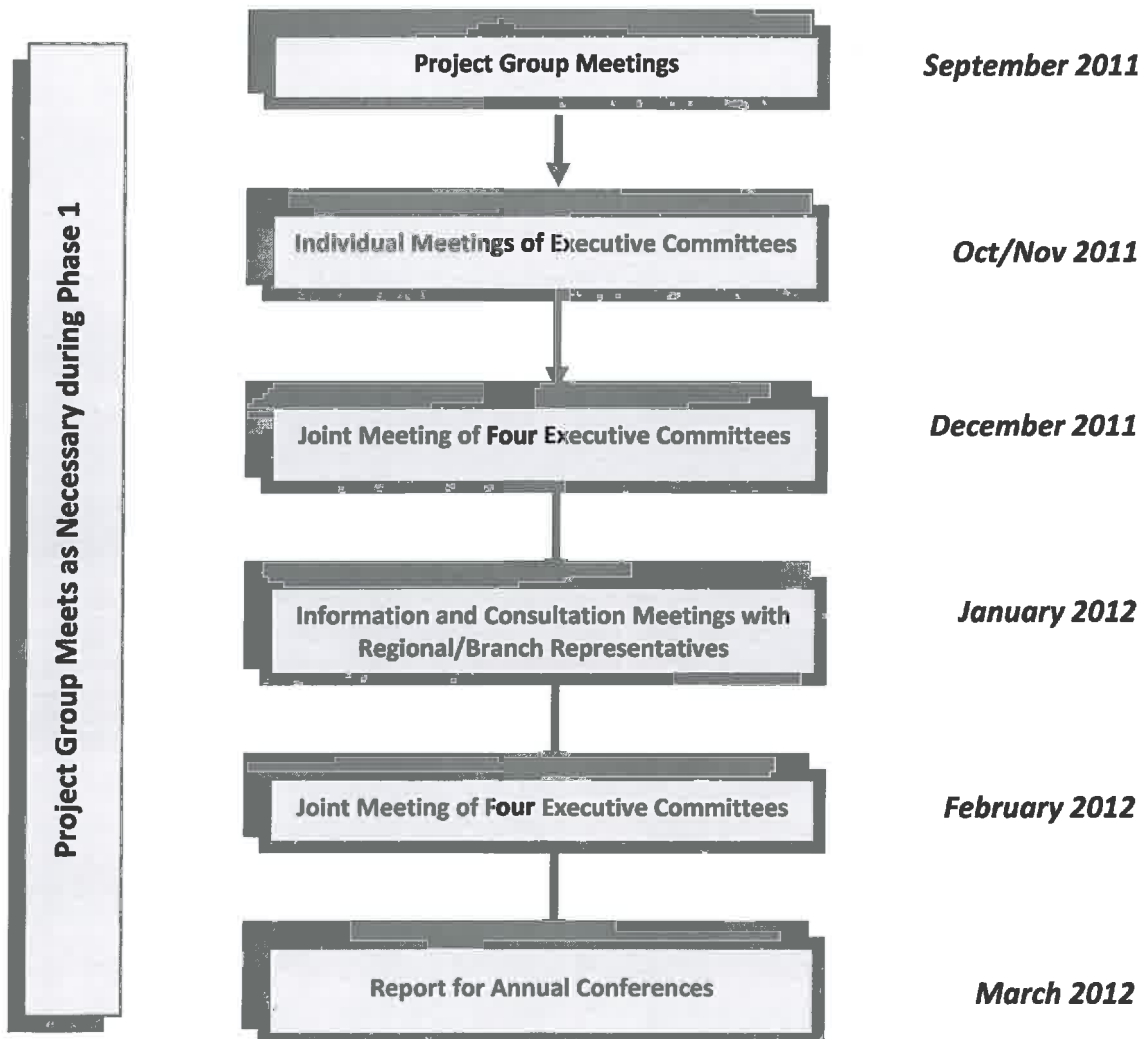
There were a number of reasons for commencing the discussions in 2011. One was to fulfil the democratic mandates. Another was that the four unions had been working together more closely around government cutbacks and the Croke Park Agreement. Also, in 2011 the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) published a report that encouraged unions to work more actively together on a sectoral basis.

3. THE 'ROADMAP' OR DISCUSSION PROCESS

The unions wanted to have a comprehensive discussion process that would involve members and representatives as well as the four executive committees. I was appointed to design and facilitate the discussions process and to prepare a report on the outcomes of the discussions for the annual conferences in 2012. The discussion process followed a 'roadmap' that provided for two phases. Phase 1 ran from September 2011 to March 2012, see the diagram below. Phase 2 will commence after the annual conferences, subject of course to consideration of the report at the conferences.

The discussions were overseen by a Project Group comprising of the Presidents, Vice-Presidents and Deputy General Secretaries of the four unions. Over October/November 2011 each of the individual executive committees had a facilitated discussion on the 2007/2008 motion. This provided each executive

committee with an opportunity to consider the issue of closer co-operation in light of the 2011 economic, political and industrial relations context and in light of each union's current priorities. I took note of the key points emerging from these discussions and was then in a position to feed these back to the four executive committees at the first joint executive committee meeting in December 2011. In January 2012 there was a series of information/consultation meetings involving local and regional representatives and members. Again, the key points emerging from these meetings were recorded and they were fed back to the second joint executive committee meeting in February 2012.



Before reporting on the findings from the 'roadmap' discussions it is worth giving some basic information about each of the four teacher unions and about how they currently co-operate with each other.

4. TEACHERS AND LECTURERS TRADE UNIONS

The structure of teacher and lecturer trade unionism in the Republic of Ireland has historically reflected the structure of the education system itself. There is a short profile of each of the four teacher unions in the box below.

ASTI	IFUT
<p>The ASTI was formed in 1909 and has been a single organisation from the outset. It organises teachers and principals in voluntary secondary schools and in community/comprehensive schools. It has 18,000 members. These are organised into 56 branches in 18 geographical regions. Executive decision making takes place between conferences at two levels. There is a Standing Committee of 23 members that meets monthly and a Central Executive Committee of 180 members that meets at least twice a year. The union has an Annual Convention of some 500 delegates including the members of the CEC.</p>	<p>IFUT was formed in 1965 through a merger of several academic staff associations. It organises lecturers, professors, researchers and other professional grades such as librarians. It has 2,100 members. These are organised into 10 branches, one of which is a national branch and nine of which are based in single institutions. Executive decision making takes place between conferences at two levels. There is an Executive of 13 members and a Council of 48 members, including the Executive. IFUT holds an Annual Conference.</p>
INTO	TUI
<p>The INTO was formed in 1868 and has been a single organisation from the outset. In the Republic of Ireland it organises primary teachers and principals. In Northern Ireland it organises primary and secondary teachers and principals. It has 39,000 members. These are organised into 178 geographic branches and into 16 District Committees. Executive decision making takes place between conferences through a Central Executive Committee of 22 members. The union has an Annual Congress of some 800 delegates.</p>	<p>The TUI was formed in 1973 but dates back to 1930 when the vocational education system was introduced. It organises teachers and principals in VEC schools, community colleges, community and comprehensive schools and other areas including prisons and Youthreach. It organises lecturers in Institutes of Technology. It has 15,800 members. These are organised into 59 branches in 19 areas. Executive decision making takes place between conferences through an Executive Committee of 22 members. The union has an Annual Congress of some 400 delegates.</p>

Historically, there were separate unions for the different sectors: primary, secondary, vocational and university. This is largely still the case today. When community and comprehensive schools and colleges came to be developed the lines of separation between the traditional secondary and vocational sectors became less distinct. ASTI and TUI both organise teachers in community and comprehensive schools. IFUT was formed through a coming together of separate academic staff associations from the universities and teacher training colleges. Inevitably, then, the individual unions reflect the issues and needs of their individual sectors, as will be seen in the detailed findings below. The INTO alone among the four unions organises in Northern Ireland where it is also involved in a project to build greater cooperation with the UTU (Ulster Teachers' Union).

Trade union formation around sectors and occupations or professions is not peculiar to the education sector. Prior to the formation of IMPACT, for example, there tended to be separate trade unions covering the civil service and the local authority and health sectors (health services and hospitals had once been part of the local government system in Ireland). And within these sectors there tended to be different unions for different grades, occupations and professions. So, it is not unusual that there should be four separate teacher unions.

5. CO-OPERATION BETWEEN THE FOUR UNIONS

The focus of this report is on *closer* co-operation between the four teacher unions. It is important to acknowledge that at present the four unions co-operate on a wide range of issues through a range of organisations and fora. ASTI, INTO and TUI are participants in the Teachers' Conciliation Council (TCC) which deals with the pay and conditions of primary and post-primary teachers. They take a planned approach to the work of the TCC. All four unions are affiliated to ICTU and to its Public Services Committee through which they take part in broader negotiations on pay and conditions issues including the Croke Park Agreement.

Each month the Presidents, General Secretaries, and Deputy General Secretaries of the four unions meet to discuss ongoing issues of common concern, to brief each

other on their decisions and activities, and where relevant, to take joint action. A recent example of joint action was the commissioning by ASTI, INTO and TUI of the Trident Report on teacher pensions. In addition, there are trilateral forms of co-operation between ASTI, INTO and TUI on issues that are specific to these unions. There are also bilateral forms of co-operation between the ASTI and TUI on issues that are specific to the post-primary sector and between IFUT and TUI on issues specific to the third level sector such as the pay and conditions of lecturers and researchers.

6. COMMISSION ON THE IRISH TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

At its July 2011 conference ICTU adopted a report titled 'Report of the Commission on the Irish Trade Union Movement: A Call to Action'. The purpose of the Commission was to review trade union organisation in Ireland with the objective of optimising effectiveness through co-ordination of resources. The Commission concluded that there were too many trade unions and that there was a need to consolidate capacity to achieve real focus on the essential tasks which faced working people and their families. The Commission recommended bringing unions together in common areas of the labour market as 'sectoral groupings' and to encourage the development of sectoral plans on union structures, organising and negotiating strategies.

The Commission noted that in 2011 the four teacher unions had set up an inter-union working group to advance the 2007/2008 motion on closer co-operation. Meetings of the four teaching unions could now constitute a 'sectoral grouping' within the Commission's terms. The Commission suggested that discussions should commence in other areas including the public services, involving IMPACT and PSEU, and in the private services sector, involving CWU, IBOA and MANDATE.

7. INDIVIDUAL MEETINGS OF EXECUTIVE COMMITTEES

Over October/November 2011 each executive committee had a facilitated discussion on its current attitude towards the 2007/2008 motion on closer co-operation. As already noted, these discussions provided the executive committees with an

opportunity to focus in depth on the issue of inter-union co-operation, taking account of their own interests and current priorities.

The outcomes from these discussions did not constitute definitive positions as the 'roadmap' provided for subsequent inter-union discussions as well as consultations with members and representatives. While there were certain differences of emphasis between the four unions there was a higher degree of common ground.

The following common viewpoints emerged from the individual executive committee meetings:

- *The Idea of Closer Co-operation:* the unions said that they agreed in principle with the idea of closer co-operation and that they wanted to continue with these discussions. An important factor behind this viewpoint was what many identified as the unique situation that teachers and lecturers now found themselves in, i.e. on the receiving end of significant threats to pay and conditions of employment and of damaging funding cutbacks. Many perceived the current context as significantly widening the range of issues that the four teacher unions now had in common.
- *Views on the Federation Structure:* there was a generally positive response to the federation idea but with certain reservations around the proposed structures, working arrangements and proposed agenda.
- *Benefits of Closer Co-operation:* they considered that closer co-operation could strengthen the influence and bargaining power of the four unions as well as providing scope for cost savings and the sharing of resources and expertise.
- *Concerns about Closer Co-operation:* the unions shared a number of concerns about closer co-operation including: possible loss of autonomy, possible loss of focus on sectoral agendas and a fear that new structures might be bureaucratic and time-consuming.

- *Barriers to Closer Co-operation:* the unions identified a number of barriers that they considered might block moves towards closer co-operation, including: ongoing tensions and a degree of mistrust between the unions; the wide diversity of educational and industrial relations agendas; differences in pay and conditions of employment in the different sectors; and the tendency that unions had from time to time to take unilateral decisions, i.e. decisions that a union was entitled to make but that caused difficulties for the other unions, damaged trust and increased tensions between them both privately and in the public domain.

The executive committees had interesting discussions about what they valued in each other. Each union identified features of the other three unions that it admired and that it considered would be of value in the context of closer co-operation. ASTI valued IFUT's members' roles in delivering teacher education; INTO's relations with local communities and capacity to mobilise them; and TUI's strong interface with politicians through the VEC system. IFUT valued the resources, current strengths and leaderships of ASTI, INTO and TUI. INTO valued the university backgrounds of ASTI, IFUT and TUI members; the strong media presence of ASTI; and IFUT's role in teacher education. TUI valued ASTI's regional representative system and definitive positions on education policy; IFUT's role in third level education, what it perceived as IFUTs' current regeneration, and its members' role in research; and INTO's influence, press coverage, institutional history, and capacity to win public support on educational issues.

It also emerged in these discussions that each union valued highly its own history and aspects of their current structures and operations. Some of these are listed here. In the case of ASTI they valued their long history and wanted to preserve their current decision-making structures. IFUT wanted to preserve their current focus and cohesion, their values of academic freedom and the absence of factions within the organisation. INTO wanted to preserve the overall cohesion of their organisation as well as their Northern Ireland membership, and their current levels of service. TUI

wanted to preserve the use of 'union' in its name, its accessibility to members and its outspokenness on social issues.

The executive committees also discussed what issues might be appropriate for closer co-operation in the short term. The predominant view was that significant industrial relations issues such as pay and pensions, as well as a range of educational issues, including cutbacks in funding and developing a common 'cradle to grave' education policy, could be addressed jointly by the unions.

Some additional points are worth noting from the individual executive committee discussions. ASTI and TUI executive committee members stressed the degree of commonality between these two unions as opposed to IFUT and INTO. IFUT had concerns not to try to go too far too fast down the road of tackling very difficult issues together. The TUI executive committee was very strongly of the view that the issues identified in the 2007/2008 motion such as health and safety, training, financial benefits etc. were 'of their time' and that closer co-operation should involve joint positions and activities based on the current educational and industrial relations agendas. The INTO executive committee questioned whether members would rank this initiative as being as important as the executive committees did.

In sum, then, it emerged from these discussions that the four executive committees were strongly supportive of the idea of closer co-operation. At the same time they had concerns about losing the focus on their individual agendas, about the proposed federation structure, and about the potential that unilateral decisions had for damaging relations and undermining trust.

8. FIRST MEETING OF THE FOUR EXECUTIVE COMMITTEES

The four executive committees met in joint session on 16 December 2011. At this meeting I presented detailed summaries of the views that had come from each of the individual executive committee meetings. Each union also made a short presentation on its history, membership and structures. The executive committee members then discussed these presentations in small groups.

The main points that came out of these discussions were:

- *Relations Today*: there was agreement that relations between the four organisations were better than before but that there was still an underlying trust issue that needed to be addressed.
- *Current High Level Meetings*: the current meetings between Presidents, General Secretaries and Deputy General Secretaries were very worthwhile for building relations, keeping each other informed, addressing current issues, and where possible, ensuring co-ordinated positions.
- *Need to Build Trust*: there was agreement on the need to build trust between the unions and that to achieve this there would have to be an end to unilateral decisions that damaged relations and that one way of achieving this could be some form of inter-union agreement or ground rule.
- *ASTI and TUI*: there was a widespread view that ASTI and TUI should work towards agreement on policy areas that, where disagreement prevails, can undermine relations between them and benefit the government.
- *Bilateral Meetings*: while working together as four unions it was recognised that there would be a need for bilateral meetings, e.g. between ASTI and TUI on post-primary issues and between IFUT and TUI on third-level issues; and a need for meetings between ASTI, INTO and TUI, for example through the TCC.
- *Involve Members*: the executive committees should not race ahead of the members in pursuit of closer co-operation. There was a need to build in a role or roles for members at local/regional/specialist levels in any forms of closer co-operation.
- *Concerns re Federation Structures*: there was a need to look more closely at the proposed federation structures as these could become costly and bureaucratic.

- *Strategic Vision*: while it was necessary for each union to advance its own interests, there was a danger of losing sight of the bigger picture and of fragmentation leading to overall weakness on the part of the four unions.

There was a general welcome for this form of meeting, i.e. open discussions using small groups and plenary sessions. Participants said that this format facilitated wider participant involvement, better communication and mutual understanding. The more informal, facilitated arrangements discouraged 'grandstanding' and long speechmaking.

Again, no decisions were required at this meeting as the executive committees wanted to get the feedback that was due in February 2012 from the information and consultation meetings with members and representatives. This was the next step in the 'roadmap' process and it is covered in the next paragraph.

9. CONSULTATION WITH REPRESENTATIVES AND MEMBERS

Between 16 and 30 January 2012, 28 information and consultation meetings were arranged for ASTI, INTO and TUI separately. These meetings took place for up to an hour each between 4.30 pm and 8.30 pm in Sligo, Dublin (2 evenings), Limerick, Monaghan, Galway, Athlone, Cork, and Kilkenny. Numbers attending each session ranged from about four to about 20. In total about 200 teachers and lecturers took part in these meetings. Those attending were mainly representatives at branch and other levels and some were teachers and lecturers not actively involved at present in their unions. Because IFUT does not have the same geographical spread as the other unions it did not make sense for them to participate in these regional meetings. Instead, on 25 February 2012 there was one central consultation involving the IFUT Council which is a body comprising of the IFUT Executive and representatives from IFUT branches.

As indicated, separate meetings were held for each union. Each meeting began with a short briefing on the overall discussion process and on what had happened to date. Then the discussions hinged around participants' attitudes towards closer co-

operation, potential benefits and concerns, views on the proposed federation structure etc.

There was a very high degree of consistency between the views of the ASTI, IFUT, INTO and TUI participants in these meetings. The main findings from these meetings were as follows:

- *Inter-Union Relations at National Level:* some participants thought that relations at national level were generally good but most thought that they were not and emphasised low trust, the unions operating separately, and protecting their own sectors. Some degree of anger was expressed over past unilateral decisions that damaged relations involving ASTI, INTO and TUI but not IFUT. Participants called such decisions 'solo runs'.
- *ASTI and TUI:* participants from ASTI and TUI saw themselves having more in common with each other than with either IFUT or INTO.
- *Awareness of IFUT:* there were low levels of awareness of IFUT as an organisation and of its members among ASTI, INTO and TUI.
- *Relations at Local Level:* most participants said that they did not meet with representatives of other unions either on union matters or on professional matters. Most said that they would welcome more contacts on inter-union issues as well as on professional issues such as pupils transferring from primary to post-primary levels.
- *Views on Closer Co-operation:* most participants were positive about closer co-operation between the four unions. Most were opposed to the idea of a single union for teachers and lecturers. ASTI and TUI participants favoured closer co-operation between those two unions.
- *Awareness of Current Co-operation:* a minority of participants were aware of the current levels of co-operation at national level but most were not. Many assumed that there was little inter-union contact and that relationships were

generally poor. Participants responded positively when told that there were monthly meetings between the unions at national level.

- *Views on the Proposed Federation Structure:* there was some support for the structures proposed in the 2007/2008 motion but most participants were against on the grounds that they would be bureaucratic, costly, without any local element and also unnecessary.
- *Benefits of Co-operation:* the potential benefits that participants highlighted were strength in numbers in terms of increased bargaining power, stronger media voice, better understanding between different education sectors, a cohesive focus on education as a continuum, additional resources (for research, policy development, legal, training, industrial relations, financial schemes), closer co-operation would reflect well on the teaching profession which could be seen as a unified force, elimination of unilateral decisions that damaged relations, and a catalyst for union rejuvenation.
- *Concerns about Closer Co-operation:* as well as concerns around costs etc, participants also expressed concerns about possible loss of focus on sectoral agendas and said that the individual unions needed to address individual organisational issues such as how to attract and retain new activists.
- *Issues for Immediate Co-operation:* areas that participants highlighted included the broad education agenda; public relations, especially public perceptions of the role of teachers; pay and pensions; education cutbacks; the pay and conditions of newly qualified teachers; the post-Croke Park Agreement scenario.

There was a high degree of consistency between the views of the members of the four unions and between different parts of the country. It is notable also that the views expressed by local representatives and members are similar to those of the executive committees. This is not surprising given that it would be expected that executive committee members would be in close touch with local representatives and members 'on the ground'.

The findings from the information and consultation meetings reinforce key views that had already come from the executive committees, in particular views that:

- There was widespread support for the idea of closer co-operation between the four unions.
- There was a willingness to address significant issues, including pay and conditions and education policy, through co-operative arrangements.
- There was little support for the formal federation structures proposed in the 2007/2008 motion.
- Closer co-operation needed to be developed in a more 'organic' way using existing structures for dialogue and joint decision making.

10. SECOND MEETING OF THE FOUR EXECUTIVE COMMITTEES

The executive committees held their second joint meeting on 24 February 2012. They heard a presentation on the main findings from the information and consultation meetings, along the lines of the previous paragraph. Their discussions then focussed on four areas: the overall idea of closer co-operation between the four teacher unions; the federation structures that had been outlined in the 2007/2008 motion; the facilitator's proposal that there was a strong case for building closer co-operation and that this should be done using the existing structures for dialogue and joint decision making and not through new structures as proposed in the 2007/2008 motion; and how the issue of trust or unilateral decisions that might damage relations might be addressed so that current relations are not undermined while closer co-operation is being developed. The views that emerged in the discussions were as follows:

On Closer Co-operation between the Four Unions: there was an overall 'yes' on the idea of closer co-operation between the four unions; this was more vital in present circumstances than ever before; the focus should be on what teachers and lecturers have in common with each other rather than on what divides them; some type of 'umbrella body' was needed to facilitate closer co-operation; the unions should publicise co-operative activities more; and the Presidents, General Secretaries and

Deputy General Secretaries should meet after the annual conferences to progress this matter.

On the Federation Structure: the predominant view was that the federation structure as proposed in 2007/2008 did not meet current needs.

On Developing Closer Co-operation through Current Structures: there was an overall positive response to the idea that closer co-operation should be led by the high level group of Presidents, General Secretaries and Deputy General Secretaries; this would ensure that discussions were focussed on the issues of the day; there should be some scope for local co-operation between branches, e.g. around the needs of newly qualified teachers etc; joint union committees could be used to lead on specific issues around which the unions were going to co-operate; consideration should be given to having an agreed calendar of executive committee meetings so that unions would not find themselves having to make decisions on key issues in advance of each other; executive committees should meet annually with an agreed agenda and format; the unions should discuss how their representatives on various bodies might co-operate with each other;

On How to Build Trust: overall there was a positive response, with some reservations, to the idea that the unions should negotiate a 'protocol' or 'ground rules' which would enable them to avoid situations where a union made a unilateral decision on a very important issue that affected the others without prior discussions.

It is important not to exaggerate the degree of consensus either within individual executive committees or between the four unions. Having differences is inevitable and can be seen as positive in that differences reflect genuinely held views and convictions and addressing differences can be a productive process leading to greater understanding of different points of view and to better solutions. Sometimes differences cannot be resolved and people have to work with that fact.

That said, it is probably fair to say that coming out of this 'roadmap' exercise there is a high degree of agreement between the four executive committees on the desirability of closer co-operation and on how to develop closer co-operation.

11. DEVELOPING CLOSER CO-OPERATION

Facilitator's Conclusions

This 'roadmap' process has facilitated a thorough exploration of views at national and local leadership levels. There was a high degree of consistency in views between the four unions and between national and local representatives. Indeed, local meetings confirmed many viewpoints that had emerged earlier at individual and joint executive body meetings. It is reassuring that there is such a degree of common ground at a time when the unions are facing their greatest challenges for generations.

Looking back at the findings from the individual executive committee meetings, the information and consultation meetings and the two joint executive committee meetings it seems reasonable to me to conclude that there is a strong case for closer co-operation between the four unions. This case arises from the fact that teachers and lecturers in the different sectors share a wide agenda of common issues. This agenda includes issues such as investment in education; structural reforms of education; and pay, pensions, allowances issues affecting serving and newly qualified teachers and lecturers. As this common agenda expands, largely driven by government decisions that are damaging to the interests of teachers and lecturers, the scope for individual unions to influence major issues on their own is severely circumscribed and the need for closer co-operation becomes more obvious. It was also seen that the unions face similar organisational challenges around attracting and retaining members and activists.

Not surprisingly, then, most of those who participated in the 'roadmap' discussions whether at national or local levels, supported the idea of closer co-operation. It could be argued that there is a contradiction between the expression of strong desire for more co-operation and strong opposition to the federation idea, which

also emerged strongly from this exercise. I don't see these as contradictory views: I think that it is reasonable for teachers and lecturers to say that closer co-operation can be developed through the current inter-union arrangements and without the type of structures provided for in the 2007/2008 motion.

It is important to note that in addition to wanting closer co-operation, teachers and lecturers also expressed a strong desire not to have public in-fighting between the unions. This issue arose in the context of ASTI and TUI sometimes having widely differing positions on issues such as pupil assessment. It also arose in the context of what participants in the information and consultation meetings called 'solo runs'.

As the range of issues affecting teachers and lecturers in common expands not alone is the scope for co-operation increased but the scope for disagreement also increases. So, building trust and finding effective and democratic ways of minimising the incidence of unilateral decisions that damaged relations are important practical issues that need to be addressed.

It was seen in the summaries of outcomes from the executive committee meetings and the information and consultation meetings that the level of awareness of each other's organisations was not very high. There is a need, therefore, to develop greater awareness of each other's structures, roles, strengths, policies etc

It has to be acknowledged that teachers and lecturers have a powerful attachment to their sectors and to their unions. They want to be able to co-operate on the issues that require co-operation while focussing at the same time on the issues that are unique to their different sectors and memberships. Any realistic approach towards closer co-operation needs to take this factor into account.

Next Steps

Based on these conclusions, the teacher unions need to develop closer co-operation around the positive developments that are already taking place. As indicated earlier, there is already a considerable degree of co-operation between the four unions. Each month the Presidents, General Secretaries and Deputy General Secretaries

meet to discuss current issues. It makes sense that this 'high level group' should be the engine for developing closer co-operation rather than any new group or committee.

As already indicated, this group is already engaging around current agendas including the Croke Park Agreement; education cutbacks and restructuring; and other matters. While this is not a decision-making structure, its tight size and availability of those involved make it a useful way to share information and insights, and to discuss viable union positions and responses to current attacks on conditions. It is clear from the executive committee meetings and from the information and consultation meetings that almost everyone wants this level of engagement to continue.

However, as widely recognised in the discussion process, closer co-operation cannot be confined to a single point of engagement. For closer co-operation to be meaningful it needs to involve members and representatives at a range of organisational levels. It needs to be based on activities around issues of common concern where closer co-operation 'adds value' to what each of the unions could do on their own anyway.

On that basis, I think the unions need to consider undertaking joint projects that can be used to test the extent to which closer co-operation can 'add value' for union members. Joint projects can also facilitate closer working between members of the four unions thus leading to greater mutual awareness and understanding. The unions need to strike a reasonable balance between resourcing their own activities and resourcing joint activities. The suggestions here are not put forward on the basis that they all have to be adopted let alone adopted at the one time. They are ideas for consideration that should help to shape the discussions at the 'high level group'.

Some examples of joint projects that should be considered by the 'high level group' are:

- *Education Policy:* some aspect of education policy that affects all four unions and that could be worked on together within a realistic timescale of about a year. Such a project would allow the unions to draw upon their internal expertise in the form of executive committee and education committee members as well as their education and research officers. It could also facilitate wider membership involvement through a seminar or workshop or conference on the topic concerned. A project along these lines might also contribute to meeting the expectation that closer co-operation would reflect well on the teaching profession.

- *Shared Service Delivery:* if closer co-operation makes sense then it should, over time, lead to the unions delivering some services on a shared basis. The aim should be to deliver an improved service by dint of sharing resources and harnessing wider expertise than is available in any single union. So as to avoid unnecessary risks, this should be developed on a pilot basis. An example could be joint delivery of trade union training in general or some specific aspect of trade union training such as leadership training or organisation development for branch officers (how to develop branch annual plans, recruitment drives, develop a branch communications strategy etc).

- *Shared Commissioning of Services:* closer co-operation should lead to cost savings for the unions and one way of achieving this is through shared commissioning and purchasing. Already, the unions have sought single rather than separate legal opinions on certain issues. Further consideration should be given to how savings can be made using this approach.

- *Media Co-operation:* there were many references to the media throughout this discussion process. Many participants considered that teachers currently got a bad press and wanted the unions to act together to improve the media portrayal of the teaching profession. Others cited as a source of inter-union tension a desire to be 'in first' with press releases etc. The unions have considerable resources and expertise available to them in their press offices. It would be

worthwhile for the media personnel to discuss how they might co-operate on media initiatives to their mutual benefit without this interfering with their current work.

- *Joint Information:* much of the information that the unions now have to circulate to members, for example relating to pensions, is identical. It will make sense to consider how the unions might co-operate and reduce costs in the joint dissemination of information that is identical or near-identical. The practice that the INTO and the Ulster Teachers Union have of carrying joint information in their newsletters might also be considered.
- *Political Lobbying:* already there has been joint lobbying of politicians. Further co-operation in this regard should also be explored by the four unions.
- *Pooling of Expertise:* each union houses considerable knowledge and expertise in areas of common concern such as employment law and industrial relations generally. Employment law, especially as it impacts upon contracts of employment, is increasingly important for teachers and lecturers as fewer full time, permanent posts are available. Cases taken by one union can have significant implications for others. It would be worthwhile, therefore, to open a discussion about how the unions might pool their knowledge and expertise in such a way that all can benefit from each other's successes and perhaps reduce the amount of separate research and preparation that each union might have to make on certain cases for the TCC, LRC, Rights Commissioners, Labour Court etc.
- *Local Contacts between Unions:* the desirability of local contacts between the unions surfaced regularly in the course of the discussion process. It might be argued that if there was a real appetite for this that branches would be meeting jointly now as there appears to be no formal barrier to such meetings. However, it would be useful to discuss whether or how such local contacts might be encouraged. One suggestion that arose at the second joint executive committee meeting was for local meetings about the position of newly qualified teachers. Another suggestion that arose during the information and consultation meetings

was that primary and post-primary teachers might meet around issues such as pupil transfers.

- *Membership Benefits:* significant cooperation has been in place on the development and roll-out of the 'Membership Plus' benefits card. This is to be launched in May 2012. There will be further scope for co-operation in this area as the new card system is assessed and as additional joint benefits are organised.
- *Equality Policy:* Each of the Unions has Equality Sub Committees and three of the unions have LGBT support groups. There is scope for co-operation in this area also.

Discussion on these suggestions should commence at the 'high level group' but it may make sense to then delegate more detail discussions or planning to smaller working groups. The 'high level group' should meet soon after the conferences to consider this report and to make decisions as to what steps to next take.

Another important issue that arose during the discussion process was the importance of building trust and of ensuring that unilateral decisions that damaged relations and conflicting policies do not emerge unless attempts to find consensus have failed. This is not a straightforward issue but it does cut to the heart of closer co-operation in two respects. Firstly, it is difficult to see how closer co-operation can be sustained if two or three of the unions are angry or hurt by the unilateral actions of one of the unions. In such situations there is a tendency to walk away from co-operative activities or to suspend them pending resolution. Secondly, if the unions are really serious about wanting to co-operate more closely then it is reasonable to expect them to sacrifice some degree of 'sovereignty', i.e. the right to make decisions based on their own interests without taking account of the interests of others, in order to achieve that. On this basis I think the unions need to engage through the 'high level group' around this issue with a view to reaching a practical agreement on this matter. Any such agreement would have to be subject to periodic review to ensure that it is meeting the needs of the parties.

The delaying of decisions pending discussion with other unions may seem cumbersome but it is inarguable that a consensus position – if it can be achieved – will be a much stronger position than a unilateral one, let alone having multiple or conflicting positions.

Finally, the current co-operative arrangements between the four unions need wider exposure within the four unions. If any of the above suggestions are adopted they too should receive wide exposure among members.

In sum, then, there is not just a need for closer co-operation between the four unions but there is a clear appetite at local and national leadership levels for this. While having regard to the necessity to address the individual needs of their separate memberships this report shows that there is ample scope for extending current co-operation into new areas that can deliver practical benefits to teachers and lecturers. Such co-operation can also facilitate increased contacts between the members of the unions which, hopefully, will lead to greater mutual awareness and understanding.

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 **John O'Dowd**
CONSULTANTS LTD
Dublin • Cork • Galway • Limerick • Waterford • Wick
Tel: 01 852 0000 • Fax: 01 852 0001 • Email: info@jodowd.com
www.jodowd.com