



TUI ANNUAL CONGRESS 2020

Friday , 26th May 2020

Address by John MacGabhann, TUI General Secretary

Please check against delivery

Delegates, colleagues, guests and friends of the TUI, you are very welcome indeed to this the Annual Congress 2020 of our Union. The timing is different, the venue is virtual but this Congress is real, the issues for discussion are significant and the decisions you make are critical.

Loss due to COVID

These are sombre times. We in the TUI are keenly aware of the distress we see around us. We recognise the scale of loss in our communities - loss of livelihoods and, of course, of lives. You are of and you stand for those communities and your energy and ingenuity as educators and trade unionists is deployed in service to them.

Public Services

The Covid crisis, has demonstrated, beyond any naysaying, the centrality of high quality public services for a functioning and compassionate society. Our colleague public servants in the health sector have, at great cost to themselves, embodied the true meaning of community and society. The same can be said of other workers who provide essential services in retail, sanitation, distribution and transport. We thank them one and all.

It is notable that many who were so recently reviled are now revered, probably temporarily so.

Work of TUI members

Our members too, in all sectors and across all settings, have worked with commitment intelligence and integrity in maintaining a service of the highest quality for their students in the straitened circumstances that have prevailed since the closure of March 12th. Our members have been at work, have not been idle, have manned, have staffed our frontline doing essential work for our communities.

Congress online

Delegates, you know why Annual Congress is being conducted online this year - only this year. The advice we have is that the Executive Committee, having taken the necessary decision to postpone Congress, was obliged to hold it at the earliest possible alternative time. The rule book contains no impediment to holding Congress virtually.

At this Annual Congress the focus will be on what I might loosely term constitutional matters, such as the adoption of the Annual accounts and annual report and the ratification of appointments made since Congress 2019. These procedural matters are central to good governance. However, it would be artificial and extremely odd to ignore the rather grotesque reality that COVID-19 has visited upon us all.

Motions of Consequence

Therefore, the Executive Committee is bringing before you a number of motions of consequence under rule 23. Three of these are informed by the experience, to date, of our members of the consequences of Covid for their work and for the experience of their students.

These motions of consequence will allow you, delegates, to set a course for the Union so that we can, on your behalf, ensure that when you return to your workplace you will do so safely and will be secure in the knowledge that you are discharging your duty to your students by also safeguarding their health and safety.

The motions will also give you the opportunity to impress upon government and the employers that your conditions of service are not to be plundered or pillaged. Furthermore, you will be able to assert on behalf of your students their right to have the strictures of recent times acknowledged and not to suffer disadvantage in relation to accreditation or certification.

Procedural Motion

The fourth and final motion of consequence is essentially procedural and leaves you with a decision as to whether or not to defer the other matters in the final agenda to a corporeal Special Congress, recognising that, when all is said and done, it is better that debate should take place in the chamber, in the democratic space of a physical meeting.

Special Congress

If you choose to defer consideration of the motions, I can assure you that the Executive Committee is entirely committed to upholding the democratic principles of the Union and that it is our fixed intention in that regard to convene a Special Congress in the late autumn at which the full range of issues reflected in motions for Congress, as set out in the Final Agenda, will be debated. Significant time will be provided at that Special Congress for consideration of emergency motions. This will allow the Union to determine an appropriate path in regard to issues of importance, some of them already obvious, others that will by then have come to light.

The integrity of language

Also, in the context of Covid, I want to address the important matter of language and, in particular, I wish to prohibit the use of unhelpful and slack terminology. What we are dealing with colleagues is not and should not be called the “new normal”, a term which suggests that the exceptional emergency provisions that we have all adopted in the face of a public health crisis of global proportions should somehow be normalised. They should not. Indeed, they should be seen for what they are – abnormal, a departure - albeit a necessary one - from the norm.

Beware opportunism

You are well aware in your various representative roles that there are employers and political extremists of the right who would gladly normalise and impose upon you the anything but normal conditions that you have voluntarily offered to accommodate in order

to assist your learners and your communities in a time of present danger to their health and safety.

There are employers who would eagerly seize upon the opportunity of having you work permanently from home; who would build upon that opportunity by collapsing the wage structure and the working conditions that you currently enjoy. Indeed, there are employers who would dispense with your services altogether and reduce teaching and lecturing to gig economy, precarious working and moonlighting in order to cut costs. That is one Trojan horse that must be kept tethered and padlocked outside the walls.

Activism

It is for you, the TUI activists, to exercise vigilance, to ensure that the contagion of complacency does not overtake us, to demonstrate at every hand's turn that you will not allow public education to be undermined and public educators to be suborned.

You are the heart and soul of the Union and, on behalf of the members of that Union, those whom you serve so well, those whose interests you protect even if betimes that is not as clearly acknowledged as it should be, I wish to thank you.

However, notwithstanding your extraordinary efforts to date, I also want to ask you to redouble those efforts because in this virtual world of Zoom and Webex, there is real risk that we will be ambushed by opportunists.

Key issues of 2019

Of course, my normal and primary function in this address is to introduce the annual report of the Union for the calendar year 2019. More briefly than usual, I will address and survey the key issues.

Pay Equality

During the year, the measure in relation to scale points 4 and 8 took effect but, otherwise, the pace of progress on the key issue of pay equality for new and recent entrants was disappointingly slow. This was not for want of effort on the part of the TUI. From January to December, literally, we sought a means of resolving the issue fully and finally. What we needed was a horse for the course. Regrettably none emerged, all disappointed. Our first wager was on the Oversight body. This nag, reluctant to run, was pulled up. The second - Pay Commission - was a winner for some but not for us. It only ran blinkered. We looked to Sectoral Talks as a lively novice but it too was an also ran.

Colleagues, the absence of pay equality, notwithstanding the progress made as a result of our campaign, is iniquitous, the toleration of such inequality by government scandalous and the indifference of those in the trade union movement, who should support us, deeply disappointing.

Our campaign continues

However, lest it be thought that we will lose focus because of the Covid crisis, lest government think that it has wriggled free of the hook, lest employers believe that they can continue their misuse of new entrants to our profession, let me, on your behalf, declare that

the TUI campaign continues, that we will reach our destination, will achieve pay equality and will restore the profession to full health. The incoming government must take heed.

It is worth noting the damage that discrimination does. When the dank fog of Covid clears, the teacher supply crisis will remain, largely because the inequity of pay discrimination remains.

Pay

On the broader issue of pay, it is the expectation of our members that the restoration due to them under the PSSA in October 2020 will be paid. Payment makes impeccable sense in the context of a planned recovery from the economic effects of the health crisis. It will generate economic activity and employment.

Ireland has endured the practical and devastating effects of reliance on the ideology of austerity in response to a crisis . Put simply, it did not work. Over 10 years on, many of the deep wounds it inflicted on our society are still open and livid, the poverty it exacerbated and entrenched still corrosive, the morale it eroded still unrepaired. Far too many in our community still wait for adequate housing, many pay exorbitant rents, are at the mercy of banks that show little sign of the humility that their misdeeds demand.

New Government

We may by this evening or over the course of this weekend have acquired a new government. If so, we wish them well but issue fair warning. We expect that you will

prioritise a public housing programme on a scale adequate to end the avoidable crisis that shames our nation.

Investment in education

We insist that you must invest in education at all levels to allow all our students harness their skills and talents to the greatest extent, unhindered by economic disadvantage, unimpeded by any particular special need, free from racial or ethnic discrimination.

As matters stand, our schools and colleges are experiencing a surge in student numbers without any concomitant surge in investment. This is unacceptable and the TUI demands that the staffing and investment that should characterise an advanced and civilised society be provided as a matter of course and principle and not require threat, coercion and brute extraction.

An ineluctable corollary of inadequate investment in the public education system is that our members, regardless of sector, have experienced a steady and unremitting increase in their workload until a point has now been reached where that workload is unfair and unsustainable. Something has to give and it cannot -and will not - be the backs of our members. We need urgently an end to bureaucratic tinkering and administrative overload. The myth that more and evermore data is required has taken root and must be extirpated. What our members need and what will most benefit their students is the time needed to teach. Good management in our view consists largely of recognising and providing for that need.

IR Fora

Unions – and employers, had they the wit to know it – need robust, functioning industrial relations fora – the sacred space where problems are resolved and mutually respectful, professional relationships forged.

Regrettably, that is not what we have at present. As the relevant sections of the annual report show, shamefully little progress has been made, or more to the point, been allowed even in relation to very modest claims lodged by the unions. It is not simply that cost increasing claims have been blocked. So also have very minor claims that are cost neutral. The Department and the management bodies that constitute the Official Side are seized by a paralysing fear of conceding any claim at all, even where concession would be mutually beneficial. This is true of the IOT IR forum and the ETB IR forum as much as it is of the Teachers' Conciliation Council.

Talk but be prepared to act

Apart from the intense frustration of not having claims answered, this stultifying, timorous approach is giving the art of negotiation very bad press. As unions, we are frequently offered solemn advice by patrician commentators in the media and the employer bodies that we should seek to resolve problems through talks, that industrial action should not be our first reflex or recourse. In theoretical terms, this is of course correct. Indeed, it would be our preference. However, when those who most extol the virtue of talking fail to follow their own counsel, the Union is left with little option but to resort to action. Happily, we are in good shape to take such action, when required. Witness the strike on 4th February.

Further and Adult education neglected

Across all sectors the arthritic pace of progress made through industrial relations fora needs address. Were our claims love calls, all love would be unrequited and all our songs sad.

The lamentable disrespect shown at the ETB IR Forum to those in further and adult education must stop. An appropriate career structure is required. The disrespect shown to our members reflects the disrespect shown to their learners. In spite of a veritable spate of documentation, reports and communiques, it is plain even to the dullest eye that the Departments of Education and Skills and of Public Expenditure and Reform do not want to recognise this neglected child of the system. They are prepared to have it taken into charge by any old agency that rocks up, including privateers.

Technological Universities

A fundamental problem besetting the forced march towards the elysian fields of TU (Technological University) is that it is pathetically provisioned. This is the Brasso school of management – shine up your buttons; a cheap and temporary sheen, a change of name but not of nature. Substantial, multi-annual, targeted investment is required if the vision of our members for a high functioning, transformative, innovative, regionally sensitised technological university sector is to be realised. Gilded Water closets and vainglorious portraits on boardroom walls do not a technological university make.

Surpassingly odd, at the far end of the psychedelic scale, is the delusional quest of certain presidents who engage in will-of-the-wisp pursuit of the legislatively impossible. Bad as it may be to be in the resource poor environment of a consortium, it is worse by far to be in

the barren land where DKIT and IADT are astray. If government policy is to move institutes to Technological University status it is incumbent on government to facilitate, with appropriate investment, the participation of these two institutes in that process.

Workload

While management makes like Don Quixote, the work of our members at third level rises like a flood, obliterating personal time. To add insult to injury, rather than being recognised as doing more, they are rebuked for not doing enough by those who do little at all and nothing of use.

At second level workload is also excessive and unsustainable. While the policy of inclusion that now underpins teaching and learning in our schools is highly commendable, the associated policy of not resourcing schools for inclusion is unpardonable. The TUI has sought to make common cause on this issue with interested parties and partners, including key NGOs . We have also in the past year pressed the DES for oversight and audit measures to ensure that such resources as are provided must be deployed for the purpose intended, for the promotion and embedding of practical and meaningful inclusion.

To this end the TUI has identified the manifest need for an improvement in the effective student teacher ratio in classes so that effective differentiated teaching can take place.

Collective Agreements

A further recurring theme of the past year has been the casual contempt that management, in some cases, has shown for collective agreements, both national and local, entered into

with the TUI. This was egregiously evident in relation to the MTU consortium, in DKIT and in respect of the so-called Chairman's Note discussions for tutors.

At local level, in many schools and centres, it is manifestly the case that greenhorn management simply does not know and has not researched the contents and implications of big-ticket Circular Letters. Our members' pockets are still being picked by wilful failure or refusal to apply the mandatory sequence for the allocation of new hours set out in the relevant Circular Letters.

The Centre for School Leadership could usefully turn its attention to the socialisation of those principal teachers, raw or ripe, who are luxuriating in the bliss of ignorance. A rudimentary understanding of the dynamics of staff management and industrial relations processes should be a given and would be greatly appreciated.

A certainty, colleagues, is that if those who should talk to us won't, we will raise a din that will force them to listen.

Internal

I am happy to report to Congress that, as the accounts make clear, the Union is in a healthy and stable position financially. In that regard I want to thank you delegates and your colleagues for your endeavours in recruiting new members to the Union.

While part of our strength derives from the coherence, intellectual honesty and conviction of our policies, utterances and actions, part also derives from our numbers and density in

the workplace. A visible, audible, formidable TUI presence in every workplace gives confidence to our members and gives pause to our adversaries. The revenue generated by membership can then be used purposefully to secure advances for those same members and to protect the quality of our public education system.

Recruitment

I would ask you, come September, again to be fully and enthusiastically involved in recruiting new members, thereby increasing our reach and the power of our punch. We can legitimately aspire to having over 20,000 serving practitioners in membership by 2021. This strength in numbers obviously has an importance also when it comes to pay negotiations and leverage within the Public Services Committee of the ICTU.

Engaging the members

If recruitment is one key focus of a campaigning union, engaging the members in a way that speaks to their needs is another. A lesson to be learned from the past number of months is that prudent use of online conferencing can, indeed does, boost engagement and participation by members of a branch.

Across the country and the sectors, we have seen a very significant rise in attendance at branch meetings, probably due largely to the fact that they were held online and that those who otherwise would be excluded because of family and travel considerations have felt able to attend. While I would not advocate that decision-making meetings of a branch should be held online, I do draw the unavoidable conclusion that information meetings might be better, and better attended, if held online.

New voices

Members of the Executive Committee, branch officers, my colleague officials and I will have heard voices not previously heard, listened to opinions not previously expressed and been informed by perspectives not previously canvassed because the physical branch meeting format did not draw in those voices, opinions and perspectives.

Consideration should be given to a judicious balance of online meetings and physical meetings for the future. What I particularly noticed was that the large attendance boosted morale all round. Branch officers felt rejuvenated and vindicated and members felt the Union to be theirs. That's a good chemistry for an effective union.

Teacher Unity

Colleagues, you know my view in regard to teacher unity. Each year as General Secretary I have stated my conviction that the most significant advance we could make would be to achieve unity between the TUI and ASTI. It is a regret of mine that it has not yet happened.

The current duplication of effort is wasteful and absurd. The competition and occasional antagonism between the unions is grist to the mill of those who would have us weak, divided and ineffectual. Real teachers in real schools with real challenges by and large could not care less about what they see as unnecessary, jaded and sometimes embarrassing squabbling.

As you know, there are disputes that are in the course of resolution under the auspices of the ICTU. Not one of those would have arisen were there teacher unity. As you also know there has been divergence in relation to a number of policy issues and this has created awkwardness in some schools. There would be no divergence and no awkwardness were all second level teachers in a single union.

Would we have problems were there a single union? Unquestionably we would but they would be different problems seeking a single resolution. We could deliver a single, coherent message that would speak to the needs of members and our schools. We could target our considerable resources in a strategic manner that achieved better results than can be achieved by two unions operating separately.

Third Level Unity

Nor is my view confined to unity at second level. It takes no great perspicacity to recognise that, with multiple employers that increasingly act autonomously, having multiple unions for academic staff at third level is also anachronistic and absurd. Were you a dispassionate observer of the current muddle, you would, I think, objectively advise TUI and IFUT to get together to increase collective clout.

Absent effective union structures, third level education in many jurisdictions has been starved of government funding, subjected to public opprobrium with a view to hastening privatisation and monetisation. That could happen here too. The unions, including the TUI, need to ensure that it does not but we cannot achieve this end acting alone.

RMA

Every year valued members and colleagues retire. On behalf of the TUI, I thank them for their commitment and dedication to the learners of this country. Our retired colleagues have fostered and enhanced democracy, because that is what inclusive teaching achieves. They have been the bedrock of their local communities. They have rendered a service beyond what can be acknowledged in pay or plaudits. They have built this Union and we are the beneficiaries of their work. I would encourage them to maintain their close link with the TUI through the Retired Members' Association and would urge you at branch level to harness their wisdom and seek out their counsel.

Deceased Members

To the families, friends, colleagues and communities of members, serving and retired, who died during the year, we offer our deepest sympathies. We remember them with fondness and admiration. Ní ligfear i ndearmad iad.

TUI Head Office

As this is the last occasion on which I will present to you the Annual Report at Annual Congress, I would like to take the opportunity to give special thanks to and for my colleagues in TUI Head Office for their unstinting hard work, their unfailing good humour and their endlessly generous assistance to me as General Secretary. You, the members, are served by an exceedingly good team of people who are committed to you, to the trade union cause and to the guiding ethic of the TUI. I have been extraordinarily privileged to lead this team and I know that, led by Michael, as General Secretary, the service they provide to you will continue undiminished.

Changes

Over the course of the past 12 months there have obviously been significant changes in Head Office, Michael Gillespie's appointment to the position of General Secretary being the most recent. I wish Michael the very best in his new role. We have also had the retirement of Bernie Ruane who served the Union with enormous distinction in a variety of roles, including as President. For the past four years she has been an invaluable and wise member of staff in the capacity of Assistant General Secretary. Teresa Dodd retired towards the end of 2019 having assisted us by remaining on for a year beyond her original target date for pastures new. We are indebted to Teresa.

Appointments

In February 2020, following a selection and interview process under rule 68, Joanne Irwin and Gerry Quinn were appointed to permanent positions as Assistant General Secretaries. The benefit to the Union in terms of knowledge and experience is significant. The Fates, as is their wont, intervened and Gerry will shortly take up appointment as Principal of St. Fergal's College in Rathdowney. We wish him well in his new role.

The various rule 68 appointments are to be ratified at this Annual Congress.

Nadia Johnston, our very able Administrative Officer, is also moving to meadows green and lush and will shortly take up a senior position with our sister union, the INTO. On your behalf I want to offer Nadia our best wishes.

The upshot of the sundry comings and goings is that the Union will soon have three positions to fill under Rule 68 - the position of Administrative Officer and two positions at AGS level.

Conclusion

To conclude colleagues, I take heart from the fact that the gloom is never encircling. There is always reason for hope and optimism. Witness those making history and promising a better future as climate activists or through Black Lives Matter.

Delegates, guests and friends, I am sure that you will find this online Congress, neither virtual nor remote, but actual and engaging.

Certainly, what unites and motivates us in the TUI is real, present and relevant - our shared determination to meet the challenges of the moment and of the year ahead, guided by our ethic of public service. I hope that when you return to your workplaces it will be with an indomitable confidence that, as part of a trade union that makes a real difference, you can make a real difference.

It is my deep privilege to present the Annual Report of the Teachers' Union of Ireland