

TUI General Secretary John MacGabhann's Address to Annual Congress, Tuesday, 23rd April 2019

In a wide-ranging address to TUI's Annual Congress 2019, TUI General Secretary John MacGabhann addressed a number of issues, including:

- Pay equality and the resulting teacher supply crisis
- In addition to pay equality, the need for a general pay increase due to spiralling living costs
- The housing and homelessness crisis – 'betrayal of the most craven kind'
- The importance of consultation, particularly in relation to Senior Cycle

TUI's Annual Congress

This is not merely the gathering of an interest group, of a stakeholder caucus. This is a gathering of experts, of professionals whose daily commitment is to the betterment of our society, to the achievement of social justice and cohesion. The delegates at this Congress are imbued with a rooted sense of optimism, a belief that the transformative power of education can be harnessed to forge a better future for all.

Thanks to activists

To all of you delegates, I doff a metaphorical hat. Through you, their representatives, I salute the work of our colleague teachers and lecturers in every city, town and hamlet. In the past year, they and you have engendered hope in and sustained the aspirations of your students.

On behalf of the TUI, I want to thank you for your personal commitment to your colleagues, for your active participation in and leadership of the activities of the Union. Your activism has had a profoundly positive effect on your colleagues, both materially and emotionally. As the living, breathing presence of the union in your workplaces and branches, you are a vital support to others. Your active, visible, audible presence keeps management honest, guarantees collegiality and promotes a culture of fairness and respect. Bail ó na déithe ar an obair!

Campaign for Pay Equality - New and recent entrants

The ongoing campaign of the TUI was also instrumental in securing the progress represented by the measure on new entrant pay that was accepted by members in a ballot in October. Having two scale points removed is important, both for the uplift in pay that it provides to new entrants but also because it brings the new entrant scale back to 25 points. Of course, the measure does not secure pay equality and, needless to say, there is palpable and acute frustration that government still seems to harbour the ambition of avoiding the establishment of pay equality between new entrant teachers and those who entered the profession before 2011. Let government be advised - that ambition is futile and obsolete. The TUI will not tolerate pay inequality. We will secure pay equality. Our commitment to that end is unwavering. Our campaign continues.

We have informed the DES and DPER that incremental recognition for the period of unpaid pre-service training must be restored, that the PME/H.Dip. allowance must be paid to those who entered service on or after 1st February 2012 and that the remaining differentials between the early points of the pre-2011 and post 2011 scales must be bridged.

Teacher supply crisis

To counter the prevailing myopia in the Department and the Teaching Council, we have joined the dots, clearly and compellingly to demonstrate the causal relationship between discriminatory pay

rates and precarious, part-time employment on the one hand and the evident crisis in the recruitment and retention of teachers on the other.

The TUI refused to endorse the displacement activities and choreographed dissembling at the stakeholders' seminar on teacher supply in late November. This extravaganza of mini-measures, one less convincing than the next, illustrated the dangerous folly of treating the symptoms rather than the disease. The net product of the super-charged Steering Group established by the Department and its panoply of portentous committees was a risible advertising campaign to woo qualified teachers back to Ireland - launched precisely as we were arguing trenchantly against a perverse Departmental view that permanent appointments cannot be made other than during a total eclipse of the sun.

TUI told it as it is

The TUI told the truth. With huge assistance from the PDA we provided the hard evidence. Across the country, in a wide and broadening range of subjects, schools are struggling – indeed failing - to find teachers. Service to students is suffering. The refusal of the DES and government to recognise this obvious and manifest reality is reckless stupidity.

Renewal of mandate

We need to be prepared for all eventualities in our campaign for rationality and justice – for pay equality. The mandate we have for industrial action was secured in 2017 and needs to be refreshed. Therefore, the Executive is bringing a motion of consequence to this Congress that, if accepted, will require the Executive to ballot members for renewal of the mandate. We in TUI must be armed with a valid mandate for industrial action, regardless of the approach taken by our colleagues in the INTO and ASTI. A ballot will provide members with the opportunity once again to pledge solidarity with new and recent entrants, to mobilise again around the moral imperative of securing pay equality.

Pay increases needed

Of course, colleagues, our ambition in respect of pay does not end with pay equality. Teachers generally need a pay rise, as do other workers. Our economy is not in recession. It is growing. Living costs are increasing. The next pay negotiations therefore must provide significant pay increases. The general election that may well precede those negotiations must be used to secure the commitment of political parties to such increases. In the first instance, this is a matter that we will consider jointly with our sister teacher unions.

In practical terms a serious deficit in the PSSA is that the agreement does not have the elasticity necessary to facilitate the resolution of sectoral issues. Any successor agreement will need such capacity. Without making too much of it, it is worthy of note that the revised HRA (Mark 2) was accepted only and precisely because of the sectoral appendices.

Tax is good – and necessary

In seeking pay increases, improved services and enhanced investment in education, we in TUI must logically and in honesty oppose tax cuts. The corollary of tax cuts is diminished public services, inadequate staffing, curtailments in supports, a reliance on privatisation. No matter what your party political affiliation, you cannot with credibility claim to support both tax cuts and better public services.

Housing and homelessness emergency

And colleagues, we need more tax revenue to address the most shameful and needless of the crises bedevilling our society – the housing and homelessness emergency. The abject, wilful failure of government to tackle this issue is a betrayal of the most craven kind. The purblind trust in the private sector is incomprehensible, the refusal to invest in a local authority led building programme reprehensible.

The Taoiseach and sundry Ministers seem inexplicably more exercised about the suds of the FAI saga than the blood and bone human misery visited upon families and children – many of them our students – by this engineered housing crisis. And let us not forget, colleagues, that this catastrophic failure of political will has resulted in huge insecurity and extortionate cost for many of our members, who are the victims of price-gouging in the rental market. The TUI in 2019 will continue to support the ICTU Raise the Roof Campaign.

Change - consultation

Change we know is inevitable and the pace of change is accelerating, driven not least by developments in new technologies. However, education systems need stability and prudent management. As educators and trade unionists we need to ensure that we are not stampeded into precipitate change, not mesmerised by fad, whimsy or, increasingly, by powerful and organised commercial interests that want to make us dependent on their product. Such interests will be well financed and will not lack for support in the media. As a strategic response we must deploy the positive power of “no”, of saying “not until and unless you consult us”. This applies at local, regional, sectoral and national levels. In apostolic terms, TUI is Thomas, who very wisely wanted rational, structured discussion and evidence. If an idea has merit and is worth pursuing it will survive the tests we apply and we can support it. Delay that allows sheep to be separated from goats is no bad thing. It is strategic, wise and necessary. We are the custodians of a valuable element of the social contract and we must be vigilant.

We are under no obligation promiscuously to embrace and canoodle with change, to swoon into a marquee clinger on first acquaintance. Indeed, we are duty bound soberly to interrogate proposed change, to give it the third degree, to ascertain its seed, breed and generation, to see if it is worthy of our support/affection.

We have to ensure that, by instinct, management, relevant agencies, politicians know that they have to talk to the TUI, that we will not be beguiled, overwhelmed, seduced or suborned, that we will not be side-stepped or ignored.

Consultation works

We know and the wise know that consultation works

It worked in relation to Junior Cycle and we have a structure – the Implementation Committee – that recognises its centrality.

It worked - and is working - where consortia have sought to secure technological university status.

It worked – when eventually tried – in regard to Droichead and Circular 13/2018.

Conversely, failure to consult with the TUI means that changes mooted will be regarded with justifiable suspicion, will not win approval, will not happen.

Failure to consult – teacher supply

It is little surprise that this Union looks with a jaundiced eye at the risible meanderings of the Steering Group on Teacher Supply and its quirky progeny of sub-committees. The detectable endeavours of the Steering group have seemed primarily aimed at keeping the teacher unions at arms length and at denying the obvious. To date it has been to a resolution of the teacher supply crisis what a nosegay was to the black death - useless.

Emergent issues for consultation

The powers that be need to bear clearly in mind the need for consultation with the TUI in relation to emergent issues such as blended learning or the deployment of artificial intelligence, the delivery of more diverse adult and further education programmes, new apprenticeships or any proposals that may emerge from the reviews of Youthreach and VTOS.

They must understand that if you don't consult with us, we won't do as bidden.

Senior Cycle – centrality of teachers

A touchstone issue in this regard will be the review of Senior Cycle. It is certain that there will be an abundance of ideas that will range from good to daft and a super-abundance of advocates and zealots for those ideas. Given past experience, it is likely that efforts will be made to marginalise the teacher union voice. Let me state unequivocally now that any such efforts will fail. Teachers, acting through their unions, constitute not just another constituency. Teachers constitute the critical constituency without whose support reforms if attempted will founder. The TUI will demand – and we will get – the necessary, robust structures. We will not be consigned to the side-lines, given usual suspect status, focus-grouped. We will be at the heart of things.

Investment urgently needed

Colleagues, our public education system provides a service of high quality, in spite of the ravages of cuts and neglect. However, that quality cannot be sustained indefinitely on short rations and thin stir-about. Our schools, centres, institutes and Technological Universities needs significantly increased public investment as a matter of urgency.

Technological University or Institute of Technology is an empty, ironic title if infrastructure is inadequate, facilities are run-down, students are denied key supports and services that should be the norm and lecturers are over-burdened.

Schools shorn of posts of responsibility are not in a position to provide the academic, pastoral and social support structures that official public policy blithely assumes to be in place.

Staff without the means to make a decent living, subsisting on low hours at the economic margins cannot be expected to provide systemic stability when employers and government deny them the stability of full-time permanent employment.

Our education system needs a significant infusion of investment. Budget 2020 must deliver, because Budget 2019 assuredly did not. As a Union and as individual, concerned citizens we must impress upon our politicians, of every stripe, that failure to invest is not an option and that refusal to invest will be punished.

Teacher Unity

While identifying deficits in the policies and structures of other agencies, we must also frankly recognise disabling deficits in our own structures.

In the Annual Report and, indeed, in the recent edition of the TUI News you will have read about the process of engagement, under the aegis of the ICTU, between the TUI and ASTI regarding membership. The TUI, in this process, has pointed to the wasteful, damaging absurdity of having two unions representing second-level teachers. I have repeatedly advised Annual Congress of my conviction that teacher unity is an undeniable necessity and that the absence of unity time and again obstructs and confounds the advances that we could make for members and for the status of the profession. It may be argued that now is not a propitious time for moving towards unity. Colleagues, the time is never propitious. Waiting for a good time is to wait for Godot. The point is that now is the right time, the necessary time.

Industrial Relations – steady progress

During 2018, we made steady progress on a number of industrial relations issues. Very importantly, we secured re-designation of the remaining flex hour. This represents the culmination of one phase in our broader and more ambitious campaign to bring the lecturing workload in Institutes and technological universities into line with international norms and best practice. The plain fact of the matter is that the current lecturing load is excessive. This is a matter that must be addressed appropriately in the context of the review of matters related to lecturing – much delayed but shortly to commence.

In the further and adult education sector, the BTEI conversion process moved forward apace once the technical niceties were dealt with. We have, where necessary, put wind in the sails of some laggard ETBs that had fallen off the pace.

A scheme of incremental credit for Youthreach grades was implemented and, through the Teachers' Conciliation Council, the TUI sought and secured the elimination of objective grounds that had previously prevented the award of a CID to teachers covering for colleagues assigned to HSCL or the NBSS.

These and other advances are set out in more detail in the annual report.

TUI also secured a modest increase in resourcing of the Droichead programme and, on behalf of newly qualified teachers, negotiated an arrangement that ensured that those marooned by mid-year decisions by school management to enrol as Droichead schools did not have to embark on the Droichead programme anew but instead had their involvement in induction programmes fully recognised.