

TUI President Liz Farrell's Response to Minister Foley, TD

TUI Annual Congress 2023

12th April 2023

Minister,

Thank you for your attendance here today, it is very important to us all that you attend and hear first-hand the experiences and views of TUI members throughout the country. It is important also that we hear your views.

I won't keep you too long. I well understand the concept of trying to get as much done in as little time as possible – the rule of thumb for the forty-minute class.

Following best practice advice, I will begin by sharing the Union's learning intentions or learning outcomes with you.

Today my focus naturally is on responding to your address to Annual Congress. Unfortunately, as I didn't have advance sight of your speech, I will have to adapt and extemporise just as our members have to do routinely in classrooms packed to the rafters with 30 teenagers – whose attention and respect is hard won and not gifted -in under-staffed and thinly-resourced schools.

My earnest hope and fixed intention for today, Minister is that you will come to a better understanding of how teachers feel, what they believe and how deeply concerned they are about the future of our profession and the welfare, in the broadest sense of that word, of our

students and of the communities we serve. I have the responsibility and the honour to speak to you on their behalf and they, Minister, are the experts. It is they who, day-in day out, marry best practice and research with deep knowledge of school context and unstinting commitment to our students.

It is they who perform what one of your predecessors as Minister described as the daily “miracle” of making our inadequately resourced and under-funded public education system not merely function, but function to remarkable effect – as evidenced by successive iterations of PISA and other influential studies. You really should listen to those who turn water into wine. Given Ireland’s very poor record of investment in education generally and post-primary education in particular – we’re bottom of class among OECD countries – that’s some magic.

So, TUI Members, I want, in the Minister’s presence to thank you, each and every one of you, for what you have done for the profession, for your commitment to our students and your steadfast solidarity with your fellow teachers and colleagues. Minister it is these, my colleagues, who solved pay inequality. who, appalled by government’s indifference to the profession and disregard for new entrants, eliminated the injustice of pay discrimination; who did what government refused to do for ten years, who fixed it.

Yes, you, colleagues. You campaigned tirelessly, went on strike and lobbied politicians. You did lunch time protests, supported your colleagues, never gave up. Your campaign wore down the naysayers, confounded DPER’s and government’s strategy of collapsing the pay rate for teaching. Bit by bit your campaign, the TUI’s campaign, narrowed the yawning gap – 30% at one stage, let us remember. Ultimately you used your own money to solve new entrant pay

inequality. Well done the TUI, well done you! Please give yourselves a round of applause for doing the morally and professionally right thing.

Minister, is it not shameful, that our members were obliged to do what it was government's responsibility to do; to right a wrong inflicted by one government and perpetuated by its successors. I want to tell you on behalf of all of my colleagues in the TUI who have given up 1% for the remainder of their careers that we won't use our money to solve the problems created by government Ministers and their departments again. We won't engage in a loaded, exploitative Sectoral Bargaining process that's created to pit colleague against colleague, that has no element of bargaining involved. The Sectoral Bargaining process under Building Momentum was an elaborate sham, a reprehensible contrivance by government to force union members pay to remedy cuts and hurts inflicted by government.

To make matters worse Minister, even when settlements were made, it took seven long months for a Circular to issue, 7 long months before my colleagues received what was rightfully theirs. It took the protestations of this union on national media to actually ensure that the Circular issued. Einstein once said Minister, that sometimes one pays most for the things one gets for nothing. Government may think they got this Building Momentum sectoral bargaining settlement for nothing but the process has united teachers, united unions and has taught a lesson that will long endure and that will make the teacher community acting in unity a more formidable and relentless protagonist for anyone at the helm of education, regardless of the issue.

Minister, pay inequality, has long been identified and flagged by the TUI as a key driver in the teacher recruitment and retention crisis – a crisis that government and your department has

been slow to acknowledge and, shamefully, even slower to address. As the ship steamed toward the reef, it was all canapes and charades at the Captain's table. Displacement activity instead of purposeful action.

This year, TUI has eliminated the blight of pay inequality. We have done our bit, and more. Your department and government generally has not done theirs. Our warnings have been loud, insistent, and accurate. It is evident to all with an eye to see that the teacher supply crisis is getting steadily worse. Schools are going without qualified teachers and, as a direct consequence, students – our children – are losing out.

The supply crisis is compounded by a cost-of-living crisis, the acute lack of affordable housing, the lack of childcare and the lack of imagination by the Government. The theme of this Congress is Recruit, Retain and Reclaim – this is not accidental or decorative. It is a clarion call to urgent and decisive action. Imagine Minister, in the year 2023 we are compelled to tell you and your Department to recruit teachers on permanent jobs. Imagine, in the year 2023, we are having to tell you that you need to retain teachers and offer them promotional prospects. Imagine in the year 2023 - we are here telling you that teachers want to reclaim this profession, want to do what they trained to do, want to do what they do best Minister, teach their students. It really is that simple.

The question that I must put to you on their behalf Minister is “Will you let them do that?”. Will you create the conditions that will attract teachers to and retain them within the profession? Will you tear down the barriers that your Department, DPER and, to their discredit, management bodies and education employers have created? If you will we will

tirelessly work with you. If you will not, we will oppose you. We will champion our members, our schools, our communities, our students, even if others will not.

Among the barriers to recruitment is the duration and cost of unpaid pre-service training for a teacher. New entrants typically complete a 4-year degree, a two-year PME at extortionate cost and then get piecemeal hours - mere fragments of a job - in a school far from home in a location where accommodation is either unavailable or comes at unaffordable cost. And Minister even when they do get a job, they have to complete an induction programme called Droichead.

For those of you unfamiliar with this process Droichead is the Irish for Bridge so presumably the programme is the Bridge between being a new entrant and becoming a fully-fledged teacher. In order to traverse the bridge our newly qualified teacher has to complete 200 hours of teaching - difficult when you are on part-time hours - agree to be mentored in school and complete induction classes in the evening. This delegates is an exercise in building walls rather than bridges.

And yes, there may actually be more students enrolled on teacher training courses this year Minister than last but upon completing the course very many will leave this country behind. They will do so having taken the rational decision to seek job stability and a decent standard of living elsewhere. It is within your power Minister decisively to change the paradigm. I urge you, the TUI urges you, our students and their parents want you to give teachers permanent full-time jobs, to keep them here, to have them deploy their knowledge, skills, expertise, inventiveness and creativity in the service of Irish society.

Currently, once eventually in a temporary fixed-term job, as a young teacher you must do everything to get the elusive CID. You agree to be interviewed twice – for the same position! Even if you secure a permanent position, there's no progression in teaching because, Minister, government decided in 2009 and again in 2012 to hollow out the profession, to apply a moratorium to posts of responsibility – an act of governmental vandalism that was scandalous then and is beyond reprehensible now.

The moratorium has torn the tripe out of school management and pastoral systems. It has dismantled support structures for students, especially the vulnerable and marginalised - and all this at a time when schools are seeking to be inclusive. My question to you Minister is what are you prepared to do? Will you prolong the Department's pretence that all is well or will you acknowledge the truth, meet the need and restore AP1 and AP2 posts to at least the level that applied before the moratorium. Inevitably, you will be judged by our members on the basis of your decision in this regard.

From the point of view of a teacher, in a career landscape as flat as the Great Plains, there is little incentive, nowhere to go, no latitude to navigate life changes. You find yourself with children and no child minder, accommodation you can't afford or from which you are soon to be evicted. So, you go abroad to live your life and experience new things. If you take a chance and come back you are denied incremental credit for your service abroad. I mean, seriously, are we in the TUI the only ones who can see this happening? Teachers are leaving the profession and schools are creaking because of the actions or rather inaction of this government.

Inaction Minister, is the enemy. Our teachers are not somehow magically protected from the housing crisis, we have people here in this hall who cannot find a place to call home, who are currently searching for accommodation to rent, living miles from their families, seeking a pitiful room in a shared house. The housing crisis must be sorted Minister for the sake of all, including teachers.

A teacher who is lucky enough to find accommodation and remains in a school, becomes embedded in a community, in a culture and in the ethos of that quirky little place. Students benefit from having a teacher qualified in the relevant subjects, a school that can offer them continuity and certainty.

However, that brings me to another festering sore in the system – the already excessive and still rapidly expanding bureaucratic workload that is driving teachers, including Principal teachers, to distraction and out of the profession. Teacher morale is in steady decline because of that workload. The more it encroaches on their core teaching function the more they conclude that the job is no longer for them, that what is required is performativity rather than professional performance. Established, seasoned teachers feel increasingly alienated and leave early, while recently recruited teachers exit to avoid professional suffocation. Minister, teachers feel downtrodden, disregarded and distanced from what they do best because their entire employment seems to be taken up with half-baked initiatives, pointless briefings, reporting to external agencies so that those agencies can tick a bureaucratic box, chronicling their every move and lesson. All of this takes away both from productive time with students and, more and more, from personal time.

We know Minister that a lack of accountability and transparency has damaged Irish society – a dire litany of scandals bears solemn testimony to this sobering fact. We teachers want our students to be safe. Day by day it is we who keep them safe. However, the school cannot and should not be the sole locus of responsibility. We welcome and accept appropriate accountability but are very concerned that the structures now in place go beyond what is sustainable.

We are sinking in a quicksand of acronyms, engaging with SSE/ WSE/RSE/ dealing with the JCT/PDST/NIPT to complete CPD, lost and languishing in the artificiality, deadlines and formality of bureaucracy. What teachers trained to do, what they signed up to do, what they want to do - to teach – is being lost.

And, Minister, we are not sentimentally pining for some imagined perfect past. Teaching changes; it must do to remain engaging and relevant. Teaching in the modern world isn't simple, as you well know. Our students are of the generation who no longer inadvertently call you mammy in the classroom but rather use the name they're most familiar with....yes you guessed it, Alexa. I don't blame them. Since I started teaching - and the clue is in the name, teaching - education has undergone huge change. Teachers are no longer the sage on the stage, but rather the guide on the side. However, Minister, amid all this flux and change we must retain the essential, the quintessential. We must not reduce teaching and learning to the lowest common denominator. We must retain rigour and inquiry, challenge and quality. We must not short-change our students with the lie that all learning is effortless, instantly enjoyable, automatic. We must not rob them of an appropriate and proportionate sense of

personal responsibility. And Minister, there is a burgeoning cottage industry spinning the yarn of this lie – the whirring wheels of which can be heard within some sections of your department and of other state agencies. It's time to reclaim the profession Minister, listen to Hattie and his ilk as they explore what teaching is, allow us do what we and our Principal teachers do best, lead learning and simply teach.

Your Department is aware of the issues that are causing the recruitment and retention crisis. You've set up the Teacher Supply Board and we in the TUI have engaged with it. We've heard all about the 15 processes including the Teacher Share Scheme that have been put in place to help alleviate the situation but, Minister, they haven't worked. Firstly, they're ten years too late and secondly, they have been utilised as a screen to obstruct vision of the key problems – problems that the Department and government are either unwilling or unable to address. The TUI has told you what to do in the immediate term and it still hasn't been done. For example, give those who have come back from abroad incremental credit; amend Circular 71/22 - initiate a teacher relocation scheme, give permanent jobs, Minister it's not rocket science and, what's more, its low cost for huge systemic value.

While we're on the subject of what's not rocket science, let's talk about Senior Cycle Redevelopment. Minister, I must thank you for your recent decision to defer the movement of Paper 1 in Irish and English into 5th year. Your decision, which we believe to be the right one, was much appreciated. However, the ambiguity of language and choice of the word deferral is concerning. Minister bringing forward Paper 1 would be regressive and would, in our considered, professional view be unfair to students. We told you so, the students told you so, the ASTI told you, An Greasan and INOTE told you so.. Hence our concern about the

suggestion that this is just a deferral. Therefore, I would ask you definitively to drop the proposal. All concerned could do without an action replay in the next school year. Students could do without the uncertainty and anxiety that the proposal generated.

Our opposition to the Paper 1 proposal is principled and, we believe, professionally and educationally valid. It will not abate.

But Minister never let it be said that we in the TUI are against appropriate, valid renewal and reform. Our members shaped the discussion about Senior Cycle by engaging in a positive, progressive and pro-active manner with the NCCA Review. Members went to meetings, engaged in consultations, and sat on committees in order to facilitate a much-needed process. The redevelopment of Senior Cycle, as we're now calling it, fed into your announcement on the 29th of March 2022. On that day you told us the purpose was to empower engage and enrich the student body. You told us last year that you would work with us to co-create, co-construct and engage but Minister very little has happened since. There has been no consultation with us and, while I'd like to dress this up and sugar coat it, I can't Minister. The Department officials met with members of the TUI to explain the proposals; that was the extent of our direct engagement. In late 2022, we organised a joint conference with the ASTI and early this year we organised a joint conference with the ISSU. Officials of your dept attended and spoke to us; for that we are again very grateful. However, two weeks after that conference we were told by the same officials that the proposed changes to Paper 1 were happening. Then, suddenly, two weeks later the media informed the world they weren't. Minister that is not consultation, nor is it co-creation. It is rather a complete and blatant

disregard for the practitioner, the union and the students involved. This tactic of excluding us cannot continue Minister.

Senior Cycle change requires more than just resources and consultation Minister; it requires trust. At the moment that trust is teetering on a knife edge. This is not the way to reform or redevelop what can only be described as an Irish institution. The Leaving Cert is part of the cultural fabric of Ireland; we've all done one, we all have an opinion on it but changing it will be even more difficult for you Minister if you don't bring us on board.

In March 2022 you issued a statement saying that these reforms are timely and ambitious, that we must not rush but we cannot delay. Well Minister, you took your own advice there anyway - a year later the Senior Cycle Redevelopment Board was established. Like Hamlet the great procrastinator, you have the "cause and will and strength and means to do it" but instead you have waited, pondered, considered, while almost a year passed. Like Hamlet you must now be feeling the pressure. As he said himself, "O cursed spite that ever I was born to set it right". Minister, engage with us and we may be able to set it right together. We all acknowledge that we must move away from a CAO system where the need for points seems to have replaced the need for learning.

On behalf of our members, I wish to give credit where it is due. You must be congratulated and commended for the removal of ring-fencing in LCVP/LCA and similarly for facilitating the continuance of PLU1s to LC. All TUI ideas by the way minister which we thank you for adopting. Of course, they must be resourced - adequately and in advance of implementation.

Similarly, we welcome new subjects but wonder where they fit in an already restrictive teacher allocation system. Currently many schools can't offer Politics and Society or indeed PE because they don't have the teachers available within their allocation. Schools have the dilemma of whether or not to drop an existing subject to offer a new one. I know of many schools that don't even have a PE hall. How can they offer a PE class to LC when they've nowhere to do PE. SEC stats for last year showed that only 330 schools could offer PE to LC and only 190 offered Politics and Society for LC.

Media attention recently turned to Computer Science which only 16% of schools can offer because they have neither the allocation, the personnel, the equipment nor the resources to teach it. This does not augur well for new subjects like Drama Film, and Theatre Studies and Climate Action and Sustainable Development. Who teaches them, where do they get the resources, the time etc. In the absence of increased teacher allocation and additional investment in school infrastructure, existing inequalities in regard to programme range and subject choice will be exacerbated. Those who have will have more and those who don't have will go without. The new subjects will become the preserve of the privileged. We ask you Minister to address and obviate this problem.

I also need to sound a note of caution and concern about the network schools model of piloting possible reforms. The reality is that the Network schools that engage with SC redevelopment will have a privileged experience, where money, resources and support will be offered to them while other schools just continue to cope. This will again lead Minister to further disadvantaging the most disadvantaged, the Deis schools, the small schools, the rural stand-alone schools. The TUI cannot and will not allow this to happen Minister. Your

department and the other relevant agencies need to engage meaningfully with us on this matter.

Our schools live and cope with practical reality and the constraining effects of inadequate resourcing every day. They deal with the most disadvantaged students in the system: they've added special classes, welcomed refugees, been to the forefront of inclusion at every level and while we must acknowledge your financial commitment to education on many levels, we must also point out the flaws in the system at present. To have a truly inclusive school we must have the staff, the resources, the training and the commitment to follow through. Our members have the will Minister but they don't have the means. For example, schools all over the country are struggling to recruit SEN co-ordinators, trained experts who can assist vulnerable children. They can't be found because someone in government thought it a good idea to remove the SEN allowance, Imagine.

Minister if you and the government is serious about SEN and AEN, give us an ex-quota teacher for every school, regardless of size. That is within your gift, that is quite simply the right thing to do.

And while I'm on the subject of areas struggling to recruit teachers, we must address Irish and in particular JC Irish Tá go leor gur féidir a rá faoin nGaeilge ag leibhéal na Sraithe Sóisearaí agus cé chomh míshásta agus atá daoine, tromlach na múinteoirí ina measc, leis na sonraíochtaí nua ar an iomlán. Dar leis an Athbhreithniú Luath ar Chur i bhFeidhm na Sonraíochtaí T1 agus T2, is léir go bhfuil ana-chuid nach bhfuil i gceart faoi. Is léir freisin go bhfuil scrúdú cainte de dhíth ó 98 faoin gcéad de mhúinteoirí i scoileanna T1 agus 97 faoin

gcéad de mhúinteoirí i scoileanna T2. Cá fhad a mbeidh ar mhúinteoirí fanacht ar athruithe a Aire??

Junior Cycle Irish, Minister, is problematic.

So too are the amount of CBAs currently being navigated in schools. School calendars are full and fixed in September with 20 CBAs to be completed over second and third year provision. Where is the room for extra-curricular activity, where is the space for conversation or debate, where indeed is the time for real wellbeing within this constrained system?

Besides specific issues with Junior Cycle itself Minister it has to be said clearly and comprehensibly, that we and you must learn the lessons of the past – assessment by teachers of their own students does not work in and is not fit or fair for the Irish context. We did what was necessary during the pandemic on a strictly without precedent basis. By year two – accredited grades – we saw clear evidence of the recurring venalities and the deep flaws that are endemic to systems of teacher-based assessment. We won't be going there again. Impartial, anonymised, external assessment conducted by the State Examinations Commission for the purposes of state certification does work, is fit for purpose and is fair. TUI members will not grade their own students for state certification - it really is that simple. We cannot and we will not tolerate a system that carries the twin risks of favouritism and duress. To paraphrase Hamlet again, it is not it cannot come to go but break my heart, we will not hold our tongues because the TUI will ensure that it continues to work on behalf of members and also our students to ensure a fair process.

Minister, I want to end this speech on a note of optimism, Heaney told us that hope is not optimism which expects things to turn out well but something rooted in the conviction that there is good worth working for. There is good worth working for Minister, worth our combined effort. Indeed, we want to work with you to make things better and “if you have the words there’s always a chance you’ll find the way”. Minister I’ve no doubt but you have the words, and working with us is how you’ll find the way.

GRMA

Liz Farrell,

TUI President