

THE IRISH NATIONAL TEACHERS' ORGANISATION

ANNUAL NORTHERN CONFERENCE

Chairperson's Address
Patrick McAllister
INTO

Colleagues I think the most important thing I should do this morning upfront loud and clear, is to **thank you all, the activists of the INTO** for everything you do for you fellow teachers. You may not be thanked as often as you should be and your work at school and branch level may not be recognised in the manner in which it deserves by teachers around you but could I thank you on behalf of the Northern Committee and the 7000 INTO members in the North and the 42000 members across the island. Your work at school and branch level and your support for the Industrial Action emboldens us and puts us in a better position to continue the fight. We are a member led organisation and we are determined to remain so and your presence here today allows that to continue.

This Conference marks a closing of one Chapter in the history of the INTO and the opening of another chapter with **Sheila Nunan stepping down as our General Secretary** after leading the INTO during the years of financial turmoil that hit this island after the financial crisis of 2007. Sheila in many ways took on a poison chalice. Teachers in the South of the Island had benefited from many years of improvements in their pay and conditions. This all came to an abrupt stop at the same time as Sheila took over the reins. It might have looked that for Sheila she was in the wrong place at the wrong time but in reality for the INTO she was the right place at the right time as she was the best person to lead the dogged fight with the DES in the South particularly in relation to class sizes and differential pay for new entrants to the profession. The gap has almost been completely closed and I believe the gains that were made were well beyond the most reasonable expectations. So Sheila I would like to thank you for your tremendous work which has led to a continued significant

growth of the organisation North and South of the border during difficult years. This is a tremendous achievement.

And we will thank Sheila again later this evening.

This Conference also marks the beginning of **John Boyles reign** as the new General Secretary. John's year as President of the INTO laid strong foundations for a strong election campaign as the manner in which he presided over Congress gave the membership a strong sense of belief in his capabilities and because he had been a good friend of the INTO in the North for many years the North largely swung behind him during his election campaign. So John we wish you well in your new endeavours and we look forward to your leadership of the INTO.

Colleagues, I thought it was very important to have Northern Conference in Belfast this year for a variety of reasons.....

The last time I believe the Northern Conference was in Belfast was in 2001 the year foot and mouth disease hit the island and as a result Northern Conference was restricted to a Saturday morning event so I thought after 18 years it was time for Northern Conference to return to the city.

But I also thought it was important being from Belfast and being a principal of a Belfast Primary School that it would be good for those of you, from all over Ireland, who may not get the chance to visit Belfast too often, to have the opportunity spend a couple of days in the city.

I am very fortunate to work with a very talented team in **Holy Rosary** and it is for that reason I was able to take a year out of school with the knowledge that the school would continue to flourish in the safe

hands of Carmel Burns and Louis McVeigh as Acting Principal and Acting Vice Principal and I am delighted that they are here today along with Asha Tarach, our Chair of Governors.

Holy Rosary very much represents the changing face of Belfast, especially South Belfast. It is diverse in all senses in that we have very affluent families and very socially deprived families in our school. We have children where education has not been historically important and we have children whose parents come from professional backgrounds. We have a majority Catholic population but about 15% of our 500 children are Muslim. 10% other Christian faiths 10% no Religion, a few percent are Hindu and we usually have a few children from a Buddhist or Jewish background. We have over 60 nationalities and 40 languages and everyone including staff and parents are accepted in our school community regardless of race, language, nationality, religion, gender or sexual orientation.

But Holy Rosary works very effectively because of our determination to take an approach that is based on the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child** and Social Justice.

We all fully accept the children have legal rights such as Article 28 which establishes the right to education and Article 29 which states that education must develop every child's personality, talents and abilities to the full. We celebrate these rights and seek to protect them..... but here's the rub..... how can we do this effectively if we don't have the resources to do that.

Government, or in our particularly case the DE and the Civil Servants that are running the Dept of Finance, have the responsibility in Article 3 and Article 4 to make the interests of children a top priority and to ensure that every child can access their rights but we don't

see that they are taking their responsibilities seriously when the Education budget is shrinking with less money per child being available to schools.

If we, like any modern society, are to uphold the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child then certain things need to be put in place in Education including proper Professional Development for teachers, smaller class sizes, adequate support for SEN, supportive accountability that supports School Development and doesn't hamper it, decent pay and a work life balance for teachers that will allow us to carry out our roles for 40 plus years without work causing us ill health.

Let me discuss a few of these short falls in our system that is preventing us ensuring that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is implemented adequately.

Professional Development has stalled- at present most teachers have little access to Professional Development. No other profession would find this situation acceptable but we are still expected to move with the times and change and modify what we do. This shows the talent of our Profession that we can do this with little or no training. We need to send a message to Management that this has to stop if you employ us you need to allow us to access training we need to fulfil our employment.

Class sizes are on the increase. This is quite clear from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and the only expectation that we have is that this will continue to increase as there is less money and more children in the system. From 2010 to 2017, which is the most recent available data we have, the average primary class size increased from 23 to 25. Within these figures there are some huge

increases. Armagh has seen average class size increase from 21 to almost 27. Ballymena 23 to 27. Brownlow 21 to 26. South West Belfast 19 to 25. Even if we take the more modest set of figures relating to the Pupil teacher Ratio which includes the Principal, Vice Principals and support teachers that figure itself has gone up 1.3 in the past 10 years. But we know that throughout the North classes of over 30 are becoming normal in Primary Schools which is causing increased behavioural issues and making it more likely that **assaults on teachers will increase.**

The Northern Ireland Congress of Trade Unions Education Group has carried out a large scale survey of assaults on Educational Workers and we look forward to the results being published as they will be quite alarming in many ways but also they will confirm what we already know that too many of our teachers go to work on a daily basis and get physically and verbally assaulted and that these assaults often go unchallenged and are clearly underreported.

Unfortunately the official data on class size in post primary schools is not readily available but as the increase in pupil numbers moves from primary inevitably onto post primary the class sizes will there will also increase. We are already getting regular calls to the office in relation to schools carrying out risk assessments for classrooms where the person carrying out the assessment does not even visit the room being risk assessed. The purpose of these **risk assessments are simply to circumvent the practical class size limit of 20.** This approach has to stop.

We also are regularly hearing from the post primary teachers who quite rightly complaining of **schools that are now using the 23 ½ hrs contact time figure as a target to aim for rather than the maximum.** We even have a principal using language such as you owe me 10

mins as the teacher had 23hrs and 20 mins contact. The problem for those schools behaving in this manner is that they have run out of flexibility and teachers are now quite rightly refusing extra covers which then causes difficulty for the school.

Linked to this, we, along with our colleagues in the other teacher unions of the NITC, take a slightly different approach to the notion that we have too many unemployed teachers. Though this is technically true the reality is that **we actually have enough teachers but they are not being employed which is resulting in increased class sizes**. DE have been attempting to cut teacher numbers as pupils numbers have grown. If teachers were employed relative to the increased pupil numbers we would actually have up to an extra 1000 teachers in the system as pupils numbers in schools have increased by 15,000 in the past decade and the FTE number of teachers has decreased by 720.

Could I also say in relation to the younger teachers that there is no reason why any qualified teacher living 10-15 miles North of the Border should be unemployed or underemployed. **Teachers within travelling distance to the border should register for work with the teaching Council of Ireland to also work in the South**. Recognition is not as straight forward as we would like but we have, both in Northern Office and Head Office in Dublin been looking at what we can do help the process and a lot of good work has been done by Deirdre O'Connor and others. Bob Allen, one of our colleagues from Cork and myself recently spoke to the students in St. Mary's about cross border working where the salary range runs from 36K Euro to 68KEuro. Maybe I'll repeat those figures again you can live in the Newry and work in Dundalk and have a salary range from 36-68K

Euros without any additional responsibilities may I add....compared with our salary range of 22-37K sterling.

Last week I was part of an INTO delegation to Brussels, along with Joe Killean, our President and David Greary the INTO Head of Communications. The purpose of the visit was to highlight to politicians and bureaucrats our concerns that Brexit may hamper cross border working which should be vitally important to long term peace and social integration on our island. It was a very useful visit and it was quite clear that a number of people we met, including MEPs, appreciated hearing for the first time the concerns about Brexit from the teaching profession.

Teachers' health is clearly taking a hit in the middle of the cuts the number of sick days being taken by teachers has increased from 8.2 days per teacher to 9.3 days. This must be a sign to DE that things are becoming increasingly difficult in schools. This increase is not about teachers taking a 'sickie'. The largest increase is in the percentage of total sick days linked with long term illness of 20+ teaching days. The percentage of sick days in this category out of the total sick leave taken by teachers, which is basically a teacher of ill for a month or more has increased from 63% to 66% over the past few years. This basically is implying that our teachers are working under so much pressure that there is a negative impact on long term health.

We are also very concerned about the health and well-being of our Designated and Deputy Designated teachers who are dealing with the fall out of horrendous Child Protection cases they are dealing with involving teenage suicide and attempted suicide and very serious Child Sex abuse. We also have teachers in a variety of settings working with children with severe special needs and children with severe mental or life limiting illnesses. Now if you were a

therapist, a coach or a counsellor you would be expected that you would meet with a Supervisor to allow for in-depth reflection of your experiences to ensure that you are acting at all times in a professional, ethical manner and that you are processing what you are hearing in a way that will not cause you long term mental illness or distress. This is the sort of support our DTs or teachers working in extremely difficult situations should have as of right and employers are guilty of neglect if they don't provide such a service for their employees. Nuala O'Donnell has been in contact with Inspire and we now know that they already provide this sort of support to the Northern Ireland Civil Service Welfare Team, The Probation Board, The Prison Service and the Patient Client Council..... So why not also provide the service to schools. We have decided to take a two pronged approach to this. Firstly we want to establish costings for the service and to encourage Inspire to advertise this directly to schools and secondly, in the longer term, attempt to get the DE to move towards providing the finance for it.

With regards to the ETI could I say that everyone in this room is accountable to somebody and we all quite rightly should be accountable but the accountability being promoted by the current Chief Inspector is not helping. The current 6 grades is effecting the health and well-being of the staff in the schools and therefore impacting on the education the pupils are receiving. Just like the transfer test is having a skewing effect on the curriculum in Primary Schools the current Inspection model is skewing and hampering rather than assisting the development of schools.

The notion of being seen as an outstanding school is forcing schools into 2 categories. Category 1 – Schools who have the ability to instantly transform in the lead up to an inspection. These schools are

very adept at this. The school leaders have knowledge to be able to do this as they have been acting as Associate Inspectors and so know what the latest fad is. Schools acting in manner do so because of the nature of high stakes inspections that are open to detailed public scrutiny .The NITC are advocating a different model that is similar to Scotland. This would involve a short report for the public and a more detailed report for internal consumption. This would allow schools to be more honest and to say this is the best we can do in our current circumstance with the current budget and the ETI could give pointers on how the school could do better with its current resources.

The other category of schools that chase after the outstanding badge are schools that consistently drive to ensure that they are always working at an outstanding level. I am really concerned about the teachers working in these schools. How can teachers work at this level from their early 20's to mid-60's for up to 45years without becoming sick. School Leaders in these schools really must take a different approach to protect their employees' health and wellbeing.

But colleagues that doesn't mean the we don't want the best for our pupils and we give our all in the workplace but we now need to clearly say to the ETI, DE, the public..... We do the very best for our pupils, in the context of resources available while looking after the health and well-being of the teachers.

We should not let schools pushed by the ETI inflict school policies that are causing health issues for staff.

SEN support for pupils in need is being deliberately restricted by restricting access to the Educational Psychologists who are the key to accessing services. This is quite a clever tactic but it is a practice that we should call the EA out on. We know what they are at. Alongside

this we have the Special Schools constantly under pressure as the system continues to try to push children with severe SEN in to mainstream as a cost saving measure which in itself is putting more pressure onto mainstream class teachers.

It has become clear that there has been a drive by DE to begin a transformation of the system. Unfortunately as they have not been reaching out to teachers in relation to this their endeavours could flounder. We were alarmed to find out recently that that during the last school year a Transformation Board had been established and are looking at carrying out a series of reviews of the system. Those of you teaching in a rural area will probably be aware of the review into home school transport. This is just one of aspect of this work Area Planning and the school estate will be another. Cut, cuts and more cuts. The existence of the Transformation Board was largely unknown within the wider educational sector but they seen their work as being so important that they even agreed a vision statement for itself. The language used in the vision statement is quite worrying considering that we are talking about unelected Civil Servants and not democratically elected politicians.

Finally can I say**Low Tax - Good quality public services - the equation simply doesn't work.** Those who can pay more should and I include myself in that statement. The Stormont Government has followed the policies that have led to low college fees, low rates increases, no direct water charges, free travel for the over 60's, no prescription charges. In education there has quite rightly been money spent on free school meals and uniform grants for low income families, and extended school provision to allow pupils in socially deprived areas to access after school clubs and breakfast clubs. So they did all of this and I'm sure we would agree with most

of it, especially actions to help alleviate social deprivation, but Stormont also expected that restrictions on public sector pay limiting it to 1% would be acceptable or sustainable ... we even had an Education Minister putting the 1% pay increase into school budgets instead of teachers pay packets which was an absolute disgrace. Three one % pay rises in a decade is simply not good. We need a pay rise now.

We all know that the Education Budget has taken a hit.....the cake isn't big enough and then we have been unfairly deprived a fair section of that cake in terms of our salaries.

We know that the education budget simply needs to be bigger the Teacher Unions, including the INTO, that went to Westminster told MPs that.....the 40+ education workers who met the Northern Ireland Select Affairs committee in Strabane last month told them that.

But to use a well-used turn of phrase you can't have your cake and eat it..... You can't expect teachers to constantly do more with fewer resources with a devalued wage packet. It won't work so we can say to the Department of Education.....

We may or may not get over this hurdle now in relation to industrial action and the pay dispute but if more money isn't put into Education there will inevitably be more trouble and industrial disputes between management side on one side and education unions on the other side representing the teachers, the classrooms assistants and maybe even the Inspectors or the Civil Servants in DE.

You can't keep cutting and expect the same level of service. DE and EA are already saying this in relation to their Services. Schools will

also find themselves in the position where they will be saying that they simply can't provide the same level of service either.

The alternative is for schools to soldier on, which will lead to major burn out of teachers, teachers not able to fulfil full time contracts so taking a 20 or 40% salary sacrifice, otherwise known as temporary variations. We know that as the number of part time teachers has increased by 750 in the past 5 years.... and schools soldiering on will result in good teachers leaving the profession on ill health so we have no choice to, as it says on your conference folders, to continue to lead the fight for improved pay and conditions for all the teachers North and South of the Island. It is what we are about and it is what we do best. We have been fighting for improvements for the last 150 plus years and we will continue that fight for the next 150 years.
Thank you.