

**THE IRISH NATIONAL
TEACHERS' ORGANISATION**

**ANNUAL NORTHERN CONFERENCE
2019**

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Northern Secretary
INTO

I wish to address the future, our future, as educationalists/teachers, trade unionists and citizens. I want to talk about what is possible and what is necessary to deliver a future that is better than what we have now, and which sees you as the teacher restored to the valued place in society that neo liberalism has stripped from you. I am presenting some ideas that I hope will inform how we go forward to a brighter future. The previous speakers have outlined in concise and stark detail the challenges that currently present for us, you are acutely aware of the challenges as they relate to you personally; the additional and unrelenting workload, the salaries that fail to reflect your worth or contribution and the erosion of your professionalism.

It is simply not enough however, to describe the negative consequences of neo liberalism. A deeper appreciation is necessary so we can more effectively combat its attack upon the members who look to us for leadership and protection. The fundamental cause is neo-liberal economics. These are a suite of policies including privatization, austerity, deregulation, free trade and reductions in government spending designed to increase the role of the private sector in the economy and society. It is the application of this approach to education, a public service which is the cause of our problems. Neo-liberalism is a political tool employed to deliver a right-wing world view and as such it requires to be challenged in a political context. This is something we in INTO will not shrink from.

The education service, financed from the public purse, has endured 10% of cuts to the overall education budget from the 2010/11 year these are not my figures, this is according to the Department of Education and confirmed by our colleagues in the Nevin Economic Research Institute. The result of these cuts means 720 teachers less in schools at a time when pupil numbers have increased by 15,000. The net effects for you, colleagues, have been as the previous speakers have also described. The challenge we face as leaders elected and appointed by INTO members, is how do we over turn these negatives.

Everyone is aware there are two schools of thought at this stage. Those that think it's impossible and those that think it is possible. Let me deal with each. For those who say it is impossible and by impossible I don't mean "undoable." Undoable is closing your eyes and desiring to be teleported to a beautiful beach in the Caribbean. Then there are things which aren't obviously impossible, say bringing peace to the Middle-East, but because people say so many people have tried and failed or; no one is brave enough to give it a go

they inherit the label “impossible”. Picture, for a second, your own life and your own dreams. What are those things that you’ve always wanted to do that seem completely impossible? Hold that thought for a second. Is it *actually* impossible or does it just feel impractical because you don’t think *you* can do it? Possible for someone else, perhaps, but not for you. There’s the problem. And the solution, believe it or not, isn’t all that complicated.

It’s commitment.

That is as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “the state of being obligated or emotionally compelled”. So, when you commit you have to commit to do, not to try; for committing to try does not work. When you are doing the impossible, things work out because you never gave up and kept trying until they did.

So, let’s apply that thinking to the position we currently find ourselves in. We have been resisting the neo-liberal agenda as foisted upon us by the Conservative government and their opportunist fellow travellers for the guts of a decade now. We have not given up. We now find ourselves in a position where we stand on the cusp of bringing to you for your consideration a package of major changes including revised working practices and a salary increase that we were told by some people in this room on many occasions was impossible. I will get into some more detail on this when we are in private session although even then what I can say remains limited by the confidentiality agreement we entered into when the negotiation began.

Nevertheless, I will do my best to give you a flavour.

We have gotten to this point because your Northern Committee were and remain committed to addressing the relentless pressure and exploitation you have been subjected to over the past decade. They are emotionally invested in this task and obligated by the resolutions passed year on year by this gathering. Your belief in them and support for their leadership has been instrumental in getting us to this point.

This is but a staging point that will bring us closer to the place we need to be. A place where teachers are again valued, where it is possible for you to enjoy a life outside the shadow of a job that has become for many soul destroying and demeaning. To get to that place we need to remain committed to the task of

bringing about positive change. We need to evolve and apply the lessons learnt from the industrial relations failures of this past difficult decade.

The first of these lessons is with the benefit of hindsight, crystal clear. Resistance on its own is not enough. It needs to be accompanied by alternatives. These alternatives need to be genuine, realistic and positive. In the current negotiation we have demonstrated we have such alternatives. There is a school of thought championed by a minority, an organised and vocal minority that promotes the view we have only one option in the face of the neo-liberal agenda which is to employ our considerable industrial relations muscle in response. It seems to me that such an approach is both one dimensional and reactive. That is not to say, there is no place for industrial action in the canon of strategies that a trade union can employ in defence of its members, for there most certainly is. But on its own such action amounts to just noise, we are not interested in just making noise we wish to make change, a difference for the better.

Industrial action, when we take it has to be about leverage not about inflicting hardship. It must be about creating the conditions where negotiation is not only possible but is accepted as the pathway to a resolution. And in resolving a dispute it is those that come to the table with the ideas who determine the shape of the resolution. Ideas that are realistic and constructive become suddenly doable even if they were dismissed previously as impossible.

The second lesson from which we can pocket some learning is that every system has choke points unique to it and when you find those a minimum of effort can deliver the change we desire. We have become very good in the last few years at finding and exploiting these systemic choke points. The current action includes a number of classic examples of such. Indeed, the Chair of the Northern Committee recently pointed out another glaring one which we will bank for another day. But I said I was going to talk about the future so leaving the present aside.

For us, the INTO, nothing is impossible, and everything is possible. It will be possible by us remaining invested in change and committed to making it happen. It will take time, effort and faith in ourselves, in our ability. It will mean evolving to solidify the improved working relationships with our sister unions in the NITC.

And I wish to mention at this point, the forthcoming retirement of the present chairperson of the NITC and General Secretary of the UTU, our friend and colleague, Avril Hall Callaghan. Avril, thank you for your efforts on behalf of the teaching profession. Your work is much appreciated, and your experience will be sorely missed. On behalf of the INTO may I extend to you every best wish as you embark on the next phase of your life. You deserve the rest and that retired INTO member whom you're married to could do with a hand mucking out those horses of yours.

But back to the future. It is an uncertain future, Brexit, political uncertainty and an unelected government of civil servants don't augur well for us.

Nevertheless, we have our future already mapped out for us. The short-term objectives will largely be determined by this conference and next year's conferences. They are clearly spelled out in the motions before you they are about pay, working conditions and improving the career prospects for every teacher, including those not currently in fulltime employment. Alongside these hardy perennials we must continue to campaign in the short and medium terms to see an increase in education spending overall. The 10% cut to the budget in the context of rising pupil numbers, the relentless drive to improve standards and increase parental expectations is a recipe for chaos. The EA and the CCMS have been vocal in saying that they can't any longer deliver the levels of service they previously did. Well I'm saying today those two bodies and the Department of Education can't any longer expect, you the teachers to pick up the deficit. If it's good enough for them to abdicate their obligations then we are not going to accept the additional responsibility, liability and workload that they are thrusting upon us. Our young people deserve better as do their teachers.

Our medium- and long-term focus has to be about ensuring more money is devoted to the education budget as a whole. A united NITC has been instrumental in making the issue of education funding the talking point it has become. But it would be foolish and misleading for me to suggest that change of such magnitude though it be necessary and essential will easily be brought about. It is not however impossible and together with our NITC colleagues and our political friends we can see it delivered if we are committed to doing so. It must also be about promoting more effective working with our trade union brothers and sisters across the other four unions in this place. We in INTO are committed to this. Our current working over the past twelve months of negotiations with the employers and the Department have demonstrated that

speaking with one voice and operating as one body is truly in the interests of you the members. We enjoy a close working relationship already with the UTU and NEU, it is established and productive and we are determined it becomes ever closer.

Finally, for I can smell lunch, if you take anything from this speech let it be; nothing is impossible for us if we remain committed, determined and united. Those of you that know me will be surprised by the thought I'm going to leave you with as it comes from the Christian saint, St Francis of Assisi:

"Start by doing what is necessary; then do what is possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible"

Colleagues let us together move forward together and achieve the impossible.

Thank you.