

THE IRISH NATIONAL TEACHERS' ORGANISATION

ANNUAL NORTHERN CONFERENCE
Friday 6 March 2020

Chairperson's Address
Kevin Daly
INTO

Welcomes etc

Delegates, before I dig down into the issues specific to education and to INTO, I would like to begin by extending our solidarity to our sister unions across the north who are or have been engaged in strike action in recent months. Particularly to the health workers, civil servants and to comrades in the UCU who are engaged, as we meet, in a protracted and determined strike in pursuit of decent pay, decent pensions and secure work.

I must confess however, that I have a little difficulty in expressing solidarity with the other long term withdrawal of labour that has dominated much of the agenda here in the last three years, but I suppose I am compelled to welcome our MLA's and especially the Minister with us today, back to their jobs after the 'Great Stormont Strike' or 'lockout' or whatever it was – jobs I might add that have not been subject to an almost decade long pay freeze. Minister, you are very welcome here today and I am glad that you have taken up our invitation.

Maybe Minister you'd benefit from a short update from us on what has been going on in your absence. I hope you don't mind a quick precis of what we've been up to and where we are at. Firstly, we've been engaged in our own legally constituted and morally justified industrial action. Our members' determination to see that through has increased in strength throughout that time. During it all, teachers have continued to teach, pupils have continued to learn and to achieve above expectation and despite the ETI being kept out of classrooms for the last two years, the sky has not fallen in.

However, what has fallen in is some of the plaster on the walls of crumbling school infrastructure and what has absolutely collapsed all around us is the funding needed for basic day-to-day running costs of schools. On top of that we have seen significant increases in pupils presenting with a range of special educational needs, emotional and behavioural difficulties, children with English as an additional language who are very welcome in our classrooms, but they arrive with only a shrunken and semi functional support through the EA and the CYPs that cannot keep up with the pressures. We are doing this in many cases in buildings that are not fit for a 21st century education, with ICT provision that isn't fit for the 20th century let alone the third decade of the 21st. We faced serious challenges as teachers and school leaders before the 'Great Stormont Strike' and they have only increased in volume and significance since you've been away.

What has also happened in these last three years is that our wages have continued to be devalued to the point that a beginning teacher could earn more working in what might be considered the low waged sectors of the economy. The logical conclusion of that statement is that the beginning of a teaching career is part of the low wage economy and that, frankly, is a disgrace. What is even more tragic about that fact is that many of our newly qualified teachers end up walking away from teaching or emigrating because they cannot find full-time, secure and permanent posts.

We also have large numbers of not so recently qualified teachers unable to secure permanent positions. Union representatives are faced daily with calls from members who are working through the NISTR register enquiring about a range of matters relating to their conditions of employment, most commonly entitlement to sick pay

when they might have to take time off for treatment for serious illnesses, or those who call enquiring of the union if they will be paid for the days they need off to attend the funerals of parents or siblings. The daily rate of pay through NISTR for most subs means no pay for three months from the middle of July until the middle of October, no financial security, no way of getting on the housing ladder, planning for major life decisions and simply, in many cases, struggling to pay the bills. We also find throughout the system, even where we have sub teachers on contracts, that outdated pay regulations result in teachers on fixed term contracts still being treated unfairly, potentially unlawfully, in these matters and it must stop.

The bulk of the workforce in teaching struggle on under increasing pressures, not just in their classrooms, but in many cases in paying their bills and keeping their households running on a stagnating and devalued wage that, to speak plainly, also de-professionalises us. So too does the current Inspection Process, lacking as it does in trust of teacher judgement, creating a climate of fear in principals' offices and staff rooms and driving so much of the unnecessary additional workload that is piled on to us intentionally or otherwise. Unlike the ETI we are not afraid of accountability, but we are accountable to our pupils first and foremost and they also suffer from inspection processes that actually drag our attention away from them.

There is a long overdue need to tackle inadequate governance of schools. Many of us have served as governors and I mean no offence to the decent majority of those who volunteer to undertake the task but we do not need to look too far for examples of schools where governance is a key factor in appalling industrial relations failures. We need, for example, to end the practice of the same people

populating the same seats for decades. In fact we need root and branch reform beginning with an urgent review of governance, a key aspect of which must be taking a serious look at the lack of accountability for poor governance and putting in place clearer and simpler mechanisms which remove governors who fail in their duties, or who preside over or are complicit in the development of industrial relations disaster zones, where cultures of bullying and harassment of staff are allowed to develop.

Take all of this together and the increased talk about teacher health and well-being will be nothing more than talk while the powers that be, whether that is DENI, the employing authorities or individual boards of governors, continue to send teachers and school leaders in to their workplaces each day to face more work than they can reasonably cope with and without the proper resources to do it.

You know what colleagues, you know and can articulate the flaws, the weaknesses and the injustices in the education system and beyond, but what is even more important is that we have ideas about the fixes – and we do. As Trade Unionists we are up for change, agreed change, collectively bargained change, progressive change and the coming years will require us as a union to be organised and ready for that. We want an education system that makes more space for teachers' creativity and fires young imaginations, that prepares them to enter the world of adulthood but doesn't put them under so much pressure to achieve that they come to resent education and see it merely as a means to an end and not, as it should be, an end in itself.

This requires genuinely new thinking, looking at what works well elsewhere and how it fits in to our context. It also requires a

willingness on all sides to challenge and change that context if the context is simply ‘it’s always been like this, it’ll never change’ – whether that means tackling a system of selection which stifles creativity in primary schools and does untold damage to young people’s mental health, or a curriculum which is arguably too full and too inflexible, or the wider system of examinations or keeping younger children cooped up in classrooms for far too long.

I was introduced to a book last year and have seldom had far away from my grasp since. It’s called ‘No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the Gilded Age’ by Jayne McAleavey. In it she quotes a report from the Chicago Teachers’ Union called ‘The Schools Chicago Students Deserve’. The top ten recommendations of this report look very much like what we want here, and I suppose they are what a decent, child centred, and transformative education system looks like. I’ve paraphrased here and there to take account of our context:

1. Management need to recognise that class size matters.
2. Educate the whole child (with an emphasis that art, theatre, sport, dance, music are just as important as STEM).
3. Create more robust wrap-around services (such as free transport, pre and after school provision run by paid staff and more school nurses).
4. Address inequities in our system – and there are many in ours from the CFF to academic selection, underachievement of working-class Protestant boys and so on.
5. Help students get off to a good start in the early years – this is crucial for so many reasons.

6. Respect and develop the professionals – pay us properly and give us access to quality CPD – we underpin everything else.
7. Teach all students – addressing the needs of EAL and SEN students, ASD students, travellers, increasing numbers of students caught up in homelessness – all of those on the margins need extra help. Cramming SEN pupils into mainstream schools is not in and of itself inclusion and can, in fact, be the opposite of that.
8. Provide quality facilities – buildings, resources, ICT, play facilities.
9. Partner with parents – that means us as a union too.
10. Finally - Fully Fund Education - by improving the funding formulas and increasing the funds available.

You can just hear the nagging neo liberal voice chirping away in the background about magic money trees and affordability of a properly funded universal education system for all, they are really missing the point. Society cannot afford NOT to do this. The price of underfunding education is way too high in terms of what that means for increased spending in everything from public health to the justice system and a stagnant economy.

If I could turn for a moment specifically to the INTO membership. Our interest in education and workers' rights takes our interests well beyond our own struggles and our own locality. We are well represented throughout the many aspects of Trade Union life on this island and beyond, from LGBTQ+ rights to international solidarity and everything in between. We are increasingly internationalist in our

thinking as evidenced by our contributions to campaigns on Colombia, Bahrain, India, Palestine and elsewhere. In particular, I want to praise the efforts of those members who have taken part in solidarity visits to the West Bank and East Jerusalem and to salute the work of the Trade Union Friends of Palestine and the efforts of INTO activists within it. I hope that some of our friends in Palestine are able to see at least some of our conference and receive our heartfelt messages of support and know that we are committed to your struggle for peace and justice, even as you face the lived realities of the apartheid system, the house demolitions, the child detentions, the war crimes perpetrated on you by the Israeli state.

As people of conscience and as educators we cannot and do not ignore the existential threat to life on this planet that is the climate crisis and I am delighted to see Newry Branch putting this matter to the floor of this conference.

I have a number of people to thank over the coming two days, not least my wife and children for the sacrifices they have made to allow me to be fully engaged in this work. I will do so more fully at the close of conference tomorrow, but I would ask you all to acknowledge the huge contribution of our administrative staff without whom none of this happens. Christine, Helen, Trevor, Paul and Marian.

Colleagues, enjoy conference, get up, speak up, have your say. Your ideas expressed here may well one day have a huge positive effect on this union, on schools and society. You are this Union; we are this Union. Let's speak out, act on our decisions and change things for the better. Thank you