

## **Presidential Address to CWU Biennial Conference 2010**

Mayor, vice president, distinguished guests and colleagues, it is my great privilege and pleasure to welcome everyone here to White's Hotel, in this historic town of Wexford, to the fifth biennial delegate conference of the Communications Workers' Union.

It is also a great pleasure for us in the Communications Workers' Union to hold our Conference in a town with a proud record of defending and promoting the rights of fellow workers.

We are all familiar with the Dublin lock-out of 1913. But it was not the only occasion for Irish workers when such an event took place.

It may not be widely known but a similar event took place right here in Wexford prior to the 1913 Dublin lock-out.

Colleagues, this is an appropriate occasion to remember the courageous workers here in Wexford, who in the six months between August 1911 and February of 1912, were prevented from entering the workplace simply because they wished to be represented by a trade union of their choice.

The various owners of the large manufacturing works resolved to lock out any workers who joined a non-approved union. Workers, who in many cases had given in the region of half a lifetime of service in these establishments, never worked again, this despite an assurance that there would be no intimidation. Today we have members of our own union who, one hundred years later, are still denied collective bargaining rights by employers who use Irish law to suppress those rights. The denial of those rights by the present coalition government must become a general election issue for all workers, their families and their communities.

It is also worth noting that included among those honoured with the Freedom of Wexford, are people who not alone, have distinguished themselves on the national stage, but internationally as well.

I won't mention them all or we would never get down to the business for which we are here. But the first on the list is none other than Charles Stewart Parnell, who received the award in December 1881.

Former president of Ireland Mary Robinson, who has done so much in the field of human rights, is also a recipient of this award.

Additionally, the trade union official Richard Corish and his son Brendan, the former Tánaiste and Labour Party leader, were both also honoured with this award.

I can think of no better place for us to deliberate on the important issues that affect the everyday lives of our members than here in the "model" county.

Colleagues, since our last conference we have witnessed a seismic change in Irish society. Two years ago while we had many difficulties, they did not appear to be insurmountable. As I stand before you today, there is no doubt that workers and our trade union movement are now confronted with the biggest challenge we have ever faced since those dark days of the beginning of the twentieth century. Our economy is in tatters, unemployment at epidemic proportions, ordinary people are losing their homes, our children are once again being reared for export etc. etc. etc... the list seems endless. We must reflect as a society on why we permitted such reckless behaviour by so few. How could we allow those people to destroy our economy when their sole agenda was to enrich themselves to an obscene and immoral degree, at the expense of decent hardworking people in our country?

What we have witnessed in the last two years is frightening. The most vulnerable in our society have been attacked as never before, workers pay has been cut, social welfare has been cut, health levies have been introduced, employment levies have been introduced, disability payments have also been cut, medical cards were taken from the elderly and the sick are dying on hospital trolleys. I could go on and on. All this is happening while the privileged are paying themselves millions in salary, bonuses and pension top-ups. Our public representatives, not to be left behind, are paying themselves large salaries and drawing pensions at the same time.

Bankers and the former Regulator are still enjoying pensions that will keep them in the lap of luxury for the rest of their lives, while ordinary workers struggle to keep food on the table. Where is the accountability? Why are these payments not stopped and bank accounts frozen? Why is the Criminal Assets Bureau not given the power to go after the ill gotten assets of these criminals? There are few criminals in our history who have visited so much pain on so many and yet there is no sign that their friends in government will pursue them with all the resources of the law.

It is sickening that there have been no prosecutions and that none of the golden circle have appeared in court.

Ordinary people have had enough. This madness must stop now. While ordinary bank staff bear no responsibility for the crisis and indeed are threatened themselves with job losses, the senior bankers who bear full responsibility behave as if they are a higher class of citizen who are above the law of the land. We all know that the country needs a reliable third banking force and disappointingly, despite Minister Lenihan's assurance that no bank would be allowed to close, Postbank, the only bank in the country not involved with the property speculators and gamblers, has been shut down. Obviously it was acceptable to shut down the only financial institution which opened physical banking to all, as none of the golden circle had investments in Postbank. Given the healthy financial state of Postbank, its massive customer base and deposit book, it is not too late to save this "good" bank, particularly against a background of ongoing bank branch closures.

We have also witnessed the demise of Social Partnership as the government and employer's groups walked away from a system that served the country so well for almost 25 years. Not only have employers refused to honour the pay elements of the agreement but they have also imposed pay and pension cuts. Many low paid workers are now lectured regularly as to how lucky they are to have a job, while they are expected to manage their family budget including paying mortgages on properties which are often worth less than the mortgage itself. Of course the lecturers are the very people who oversaw and facilitated the crisis in the first place!

To add insult to injury, workers who have paid into pension funds all their lives now face an uncertain future as many of those funds are in deficit if not facing closure. As workers we have always viewed pensions as deferred pay and the uncertainty concerning pensions must be tackled by our government. The massive tax breaks on private pensions given to the wealthy must be clawed back and ploughed into a national liveable pension for all or will we be expected to have to work until the grim reaper calls?

At a time of crisis a country needs leadership, leadership which unites us all behind a common purpose, leadership which places the necessary burdens on all according to their ability to pay, leadership that the people can trust. Unfortunately that type of leadership is missing today and therefore it is time for a change. We need a government with a vision we can all share and not one who panders to the rich, the landowners, the bankers, the developers and the higher civil servants.

We need a vision that puts people back to work. The first step in that process must be the building of a first class infrastructure. Inward investment will only arrive when the investors know that the infrastructural development is in place to facilitate enterprise. Their Ireland Incorporated desperately needs strategic plans which will deliver such development in the key areas of power, transport and communications. It is not complicated unless you have an ulterior motive. Get people back to work on the key projects and use the delivery of those first class services to attract more sustainable jobs.

The example which is closest to home is the development of high speed broadband. It is now a well established fact that the lack of this service is a major handicap to Ireland in attracting employment. Unfortunately, this well established fact continues to escape our Green Minister who probably would prefer to use smoke signals or morse code! His lack of leadership in the key area of communications is of considerable concern to all our members and while one must be careful what one wishes for, we would be more than unfortunate if he was replaced with a more incompetent minister. What is crystal clear is, despite a good relationship with him when he was in opposition, he has been no friend to us since he got his stripe. "Poacher turned gamekeeper", "beggar on horseback" or "leopard changing his spots"??? Take your pick! We must ensure all our members remember his contribution come the next election.

The state of telecommunications in Ireland can be traced directly back to the decision by the Fianna Fáil-led government to privatise Telecom Eireann. The manner in which that decision was implemented clearly shows up an ideology which favours giving "goodies

to your buddies” at the expense of the taxpayer. They have left us with a national telecommunications company on the verge of bankruptcy, a multi-national company in Vodafone who takes billions in profits from Ireland while refusing to share with the staff who have helped generate those profits, (Vodafone prefer to sponsor Man. United, the Dubs or the Epsom Derby than pay their workers). To cap it all we have to put up with the British multi-national telecommunications companies, o2 and British Telecom, who refuse the same union rights to our members which they grant to their workforce in the UK, including Northern Ireland.

The purchase of Eircom by STT creates an opportunity for our government and ComReg to use the technical expertise of STT to build the high speed network we are crying out for. We need regulatory policies that promote and reward investment as against worshipping competition for competition’s sake. There is no reason that such a development could not be built on an open access basis, thus creating room for all to compete off a new fibre optic network on a price content and service basis. The only other real option will see existing policies eventually closing down Eircom with the loss of over five thousand direct jobs and a further damaging blow to the Irish economy.

It is not surprising that postal workers throughout Ireland are extremely worried about the prospect of postal liberalisation which is due to happen on the first of January next, just seven months away. Coincidentally that is the same date our Green Minister has named for the introduction of the postcodes nobody wants. I am available to take bets at generous odds if anybody here is stupid enough to back the timetable and costs for postcodes outlined by the man who has become known as the “Val Doonican” of Irish politics (anybody remember “Delaney’s Donkey” or “McGinty’s Goat”)?

The lack of detail with regard to how the EU directive on postal liberalisation will be transposed into Irish law is worrying. Time is running out and we need to ensure that there is no attempt to either sneak through legislation during the summer break or to rush through legislation at the last minute. We must be vigilant and prepared because we quite simply have no reason to trust this man or his fellow travellers. There is undeniable evidence that liberalisation of postal markets in other European countries has led to job losses, service reductions, cherry picking and a deterioration of pay and conditions. Already the universal service provision which provides for a daily delivery at a uniform price is under attack and any attempt to interfere with that provision will have major consequences, particularly on rural Ireland. An Post employs over ten thousand people, is consistently voted the most trusted of all service providers and at present has the highest service quality in its history. We must not allow the political wreckers get their hands on this national treasure.

They used to say if you pay peanuts you get monkeys. Well we paid a kings ransom and we got monkeys. Maybe that is a bit unfair to the monkeys!

In any case you could say they made a right monkey out of everyone but themselves. But we can get these monkeys off our backs. We must get these monkeys off our backs. We must become more politically aware as all our futures are impacted on a daily basis by the policies and decisions of the political parties. To truly represent our members we

must influence political decisions and attempt to shape political policies. However, these goals can only be achieved in circumstances where our members realise the power of not only their own vote, but also the votes of their families, friends and communities.

While it is true we meet at difficult times we do so as a key part of the biggest civil society organisation on this island, “the Irish Congress of Trade Unions”, an organisation of over eight hundred thousand members, despite the fact that tens of thousands of workers are still denied the right of collective bargaining by this government. We meet at a time when ordinary working people have been made the scapegoats for the sins of the few. But despite the incessant, dishonest attack channelled through a subservient media, we will not go away. We continue to grow our membership in all areas of the communications industries, from postal/courier to telecommunications to the new so called “sweat shops”, the call centres. We welcome all those new members to the CWU family and we intend to continue our work in all communications businesses. We are aware of the continuing opportunistic attacks by employers on the pay, pensions and conditions of unorganised workers in our industries and we invite all those workers to join with us in defending those hard won rights.

Your conference is the parliament of your Union. It is part of a unique democratic process that allows you, the delegates, to debate and develop your union’s policies while at the same time electing directly the Union leadership.

I am looking forward to your input on the many important debates and indeed to the input from our guests, both national and international, and I would like to take this opportunity to wish you all a successful and enjoyable Conference.