

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

**BEFORE 10.30am ON
WEDNESDAY 17TH APRIL 2024**



12th BIENNIAL DELEGATE CONFERENCE

17th & 18th APRIL 2024

THE GALWAY BAY HOTEL, SALTHILL

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

BY

MR. IVOR REYNOLDS

Distinguished guests, vice-president, officers, delegates, observers and friends, it gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to Salthill for this, the twelfth biennial conference of the Communications Workers' Union.

So, that's how these speeches normally begin, with a welcome for everyone here, but we perhaps need to pause game for a minute and ask ourselves why we are here. At times like this, when we gather together, we tend to look at the backdrop against which the conference is being held. This time around, as trade unionists we have many of the same problems facing us that we've had in recent years. One could be forgiven for thinking that things are bad and not getting any better. The housing crisis has worsened, the health service is in a shocking state, the war in Ukraine rages on and we're still dealing with the aftereffects of Brexit. The state of Israel is still waging an unjust war on a mainly civilian population in Gaza, despite the almost unanimous condemnation of the rest of the world.

Here at home, we still witness the rise of opportunist right-wing groups that are prepared to jump onto any and every populist bandwagon simply to further their aims. They regularly put the blame for the problems facing the country on immigrants. They use racist, xenophobic rhetoric to exploit vulnerable people and drum up support for their cause. The recent riots in Dublin really showed their hand, with their willingness to hijack a tragic situation in order to simply further their political aims. They seem to be sticking to the tried and trusted policy of burning down any buildings that are mentioned in connection with housing immigrants. That's some level of begrudgery. The media is predicting that there will be a hardening of

migration policy from the government because of the “noise” in the system, but due to the nature of these things, harsher, more hostile policies don’t necessarily change migration patterns, but instead just make life more difficult for the unfortunate people caught in the system.

What can we do about it? We are gathered here, representing our members, to shape union policy and strategy and to stand together and use our unity to be heard. You, the delegates here in this hall, are the people that our members look to for leadership and guidance. By electing you, members place their trust in you, basically saying that they believe that you can look after their interests. You bring motions here to conference and we set out union policy for the future. The union acts on the motions, deals with the various companies and strives to improve the terms and conditions of its members. That’s one side of the relationship that members have with their union.

There is more to our union than that. Our mission statement says, amongst other things, that we will campaign for issues of social justice, for freedom of association, for human rights and against oppression. Recently we’ve supported the Green Ribbon mental health awareness campaign, The AsIAm autism charity and arranged for our larger workplaces to be visited by the breast check mobile units, to name just a few of the things that the union does outside of the traditional workplace stuff. We have funds to help members when they are sick or facing hardship. We have charitable and humanitarian funds to help people who need it the most. We’ve

recently sponsored a bus for a special school to improve the daily experience of the children there. I'm quoting these few things just as a sample of the large amount of stuff that goes on that members may not be aware of.

As we know, there is strength in numbers. The CWU has been heavily involved in the "Better in a Trade Union" campaign launched recently by ICTU General Secretary Owen Reidy. You may have seen Adam or Andrew adorning the side of a bus near you! This campaign aims to promote and increase union membership by highlighting the benefits of union membership like better pay, improved terms & conditions, more job security and the availability of advice and support. Ireland has some of the poorest legislation in Europe around Trade Unions and collective bargaining and the country seems to be sold to multinationals as the 51st state of America as far as labour legislation goes. It's not a coincidence that the country picked by the cream of American tech firms to house their European or world headquarters has such weak laws around Trade Unions.

This year will see the transposition of the Adequate Minimum Wages European directive into Irish law. From our point of view, the main benefit from this will be the changes it brings with respect to collective bargaining and union recognition, promoting these as a means to set wages. This is a once in a generation opportunity for Trade Unions in Ireland. It is vitally important that a strong transposition is made, leveraging the positive changes from unions' point of view. Successive Irish governments have shown their unwillingness to improve legislation in this area and this is our chance to achieve hugely positive changes for the union movement in

Ireland. The CWU along with a few other like-minded unions – FORSA, Mandate, FSU & SIPTU - are orchestrating a political lobbying campaign to ensure that politicians of all shades know how important this opportunity is. There are 44 unions affiliated to congress representing some 800 000 union members making it the largest civil society organisation on the island of Ireland, so we should be able to use that weight of membership to influence how our politicians act on our behalf.

In June this year there are both local and European elections so you can expect politicians to come knocking at your doors. Use the opportunity to let them know that you are a union member and that you expect that they will support union friendly policies. Try starting the conversation with something like “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take it anymore”. An outsider looking in might observe that when an electorate keeps voting for the parties that historically have been in power most often, they shouldn’t be surprised that the laws about collective bargaining don’t get any better. Living in a reasonably free democracy and having a say in the make-up of the Dáil at election time is something that we shouldn’t take for granted. Indeed there is an strong argument for more political education for voters, to enable them to make a more informed policy-based decision when exercising their franchise. If political parties and governments are willing to modify their stance on issues due to negative media attention or hostile social media campaigns, there is no reason why the Trade Union movement can’t organise itself to be in a position to effect positive change for the hundreds of thousands of union members.

Meanwhile in Leinster House, Leo Varadkar has decided that he has had enough of it all and doesn't want to be in charge anymore. The direct result of this is that we now have Simon Harris as Taoiseach. This sudden move has destabilised the coalition government and has paved the way for a feeding frenzy in the independent pool with Harris meeting independent TDs from all over the country. The standard comment after most of these meetings was "He didn't promise me anything, but I'll support him for Taoiseach". Hmmmm. We've seen this situation many times before, where the priority is not looking after the citizens of the country, but instead it's staying in power to look after the party. Decisions made and inducements promised in this kind of pressured situation rarely, if ever, benefit the country as a whole, but instead use up scarce national resources on some local issue purely to keep an independent TD onside with the government. These resources have to come from somewhere, as there is a finite amount of money to go around. Any such monies would be better spent on the health service for example. The INMO's trolley watch recorded 9856 admitted patients without hospital beds in March 2024. In March, the HSE were still operating a moratorium on recruiting frontline patient-facing staff. At the end of February 2024, there were 86000 patients on the inpatient/day case waiting list and 578000 on the outpatient waiting list. These numbers are mind-boggling. Don't even get me started on the housing crisis.

So what can we do? It's not rocket science. We can ensure that we make our votes count in all elections - local, national and European – by voting

for candidates and parties that have publicly committed to policies that favour workers and working conditions. As leaders, the assembled delegates here, can use their influence to encourage members to do the same. Lobbying politicians works. We are all capable of a spot of lobbying on a small scale by letting politicians know what is important to us. Given the recent cost of living financial crisis, we should be saying to them that they need to refocus their attention onto us, onto making a difference with people's wages and conditions of employment. Focussing on providing a health service that is fit for purpose.

That's the good news to take away today. We can make a difference if we are smart and have a little think about it. This week we can see the advantages of being a member of the CWU for our members in An Post and eir, with the announcement of agreements on pay with both companies. In An Post the headline figure is 8% over two years and in eir it's 11% over 33 months. Agreements like these don't happen by accident. They are the direct result of a lot of work on the part of union head office staff. These two agreements are only a sample of the deals being achieved by your union, on behalf of members in every corner of the country.

Serving as President has been a huge honour for me personally and for my branch. There's a lot of people that I'd like to thank for their help, support and advice along the way – my branch committee, the GS and DGS, the NEC, the National officers and the incredible "Team Awesome" in North Circular Road. It would be remiss of me not to mention my friend and long-time partner in crime John Egan. I know he's here today in spirit. Last and by no means least, I'd like to offer a sincere thank you to my Vice President,

Mr Frank Donohoe. He has been a great support to me and I wish him all the best during his term as President.

I hope that you all enjoy your stay in Salthill and enjoy the networking and the rest of the conference. I hope that you leave here at the end of the week with a renewed vigour and plenty of fire in your belly.

Thank you.