

Address Kevin Callinan, General Secretary

Fórsa Conference, 16th of May 2024, Killarney.

A Uachtaráin, a thoscairí agus a chairde, a dheirfiúracha agus a dheartháireacha, is iontach an rud é a bheith le chéile i bpearsan arís, rud nach mbeirfimid leis go deo arís.

Is iontach freisin a bheith ar ais sa “Ríocht” anseo i gCill Áirne, suíomh atá beagnach mar ár mbuanbhaile comhdhála.

Ar dtús, ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil libhse ár gceannairí craobhacha dochreidte as gach rud a dhéanann sibh don cheardchumann.

Ba mhaith liom freisin aitheantas a thabhairt do thacaíocht gan staonadh ar Fheidhmeannais Náisiúnta ó ghlac mé le ról an Ard-Rúnaí.

Ba mhaith liom go háirthe ómós a thabairt dár nUachtarán, Mícheál Mac Gabhann, ag a bhfuil cúram iontach déanta aige le trí bliana go leith anuas. A Mhicheáil, ní féidir liom a dhóthain buíochais a ghabháil leat.

Delegates, as well as setting union policy for the next two years, conference is an important opportunity for us to network and to explore new ideas.

I hope that you will have time to attend some of our fringe events.

We will also hear from a number of guest speakers. In a while Esther Lynch, General Secretary of the European TUC and proud Fórsa member, will address us.

And later on my Public Services International colleague Danny Bertossa, who was elected as General Secretary at last October’s Congress in Geneva, will speak on behalf of that global federation that represents more than 700 public service unions including Fórsa.

Tomorrow we will receive ICTU Vice-President Phil Ni Sheaghdha. Phil is also an Officer of the Public Services Committee which I chair.

Since we last met Owen Reidy has been appointed as ICTU General Secretary and I’m also looking forward to hearing from him.

Our final guest is the Palestinian Ambassador in Ireland, Dr. Jilan Wahba Abdalmajid. Jilan, from Gaza city, is someone who has suffered enormous personal

family loss in the past seven months and I know that you will give her a special Fórsa welcome.

Fórsa is growing and evolving. Today our membership is in excess of 86,000 having recruited 43,753 new joiners since our creation.

When I stood here two years ago, I reminded you about my two priorities when I was taking on the General Secretary role. Firstly, to move from a defensive to a more assertive approach to bargaining; and secondly, to reform and modernise our organisational methods.

After this conference when the NEC, as provided for in the Instrument of Amalgamation, reviews certain rules, I believe it will do so against the backdrop of a strong record of achievement by Fórsa.

In not much more than six years Fórsa has probably surpassed most expectations while also successfully navigating a number of unforeseen events.

Since I became General Secretary, Fórsa has:

- Developed and is delivering on a Strategic Plan.
- Led the trade union response to Covid – in the public service and beyond.
- Successfully defended Ryanair's €13.7 million legal action for damages.
- Set the strategy subsequently adopted by the Public Services Committee, that led to pay increases at the height of the pandemic when exchequer borrowing was at an extraordinary level.
- Reversed the imposition of longer working hours when few thought it was possible.
- Responded rapidly and at scale with humanitarian support to assist Ukrainians affected by the Russian invasion and Palestinians in Gaza impacted by the Israeli attacks.
- Called out the inflationary trend in September 2021 before anyone else.
- Invoked the Building Momentum review clause in March 2022.
- Held out for improved terms when the initial WRC talks on the review failed to reach agreement.
- Set the priorities once again last September for the upcoming Public Service Pay talks.
- Prioritised the plight of the low paid every year from 2021 to 2026 despite initial virulent opposition on the government side.
- Reversed losses to inflation through the terms of the new Public Service Agreement that will run until the middle of 2026.

We can all be proud of these achievements.

In 2020 and 2023 we surveyed our members to gain a greater insight into your concerns and to set the agenda for the negotiations that followed.

You participated in huge numbers.

In 2020 the results showed the strength of feeling on the Haddington Road hours and last year they emphasised the effect of the cost-of-living crisis.

Since the WRC talks concluded on 27 January 2024 my focus has been on two years' time. When we'll be attempting to bargain a new agreement for the public sector.

We will need to actively engage members on their priorities for those talks.

But just repeating what we've done before will not be enough.

I believe that the next negotiations will be tougher than ever. We know the DPER officials believe that they were pushed further than they wanted to go on this occasion.

We must be ready too.

The Conference slogan "*Your union, your power*" is not an accident.

It points the way forward.

It speaks to the task at hand.

I recently met a man from the Bronx who was a shop steward for most of his working life. He told me that posted on the walls of every building staffed by his union's members were the words: "*The company never gave us a thing*".

Everything we have achieved, we have won by organising and bargaining collectively.

That is what we must do now. More than ever before.

By enlisting our greatest resource. Our members.

You are the people who day in, day out, proudly represent our union in our workplaces.

We have made some changes recently to how our staff team is organised—deploying all staff members to teams headed up by one of the leadership team. We've done that to ensure we can deliver for members in the best way we can. And so that we can have better management and accountability on the priorities set by Conference, the NEC, DEC's and branches.

What we want to do is straightforward. Build our power.

To win and keep winning.

We need to quickly ramp up our capacity.

- To maximise the potential of local bargaining in the public service.
- To prepare for the next public service negotiations in two years' time.
- To get a fair deal for members in the community and voluntary sector.
- To hold profitable employers to account in our pay bargaining.
- And, to mobilise and win on the issues that will make our country a better place to live and to work.

That is how I intend to lead you for the next two years.

So that together we can create the conditions for our members to win on the issues that they care about.

So while ratification of the Public Service Agreement means that attention turns to local bargaining for those covered by it, the spotlight needs to shine once again on the public services provided by our members in the community and voluntary sector. The workers whose employment is dependent on funding through Sections 39, 56 and 10 of the relevant acts.

Last October saw an interim settlement ahead of the anticipated public service pay talks.

The fact is that if these workers didn't exist the State would have to provide the services.

They deserve equality of treatment and a restoration of parity with their state-employed counterparts.

That fight will resume shortly.

I am pleased that the public service pay terms appear to be setting a benchmark for the wider state sector and even in part of the private sector.

We shouldn't forget that many private sector employers continue to make huge profits. It is unacceptable that the absence of collective bargaining in large parts of the economy is ensuring that the disproportionate share of wealth going to capital over labour, so evident for the last fifty years, continues apace.

Driving ever deeper inequality as it does.

That is why we must put collective bargaining rights, including an effective transposition of the Adequate Minimum Wage directive, at the top of the political agenda.

Since our last conference we have witnessed the growth of the far right.

We've heard statements that were previously absent from public discourse in Ireland.

We have seen the reports of the assaults, the arson attacks, and the intimidatory protests.

Our own members working in public libraries have been placed at risk as a result of the actions of a very small number of ideologically driven thugs.

Their message of hate must be called out for what it is. That's why Fórsa supported the 'Ireland for All' marches and organised a rally in Cork to support our library members there.

These actors are exploiting the fears and concerns of ordinary people to pursue a very dangerous agenda.

One designed to topple democracy itself.

We saw this most clearly on the night of Thursday 23rd November in Dublin. When a tragic stabbing incident was used to incite a full-scale riot and extensive looting.

I thought Fintan O'Toole captured it eloquently that night when he said... *"These pitiful thugs are not us. They do not act for us, speak for us or burn buses for us"*.

Early the next morning I spoke with the General Secretary of Congress Owen Reidy and said to him that the trade union movement had to provide leadership and arrange a speedy response to the events.

Within a couple of hours, we had announced that the trade unions would hold a vigil on O'Connell Street for the following Monday lunchtime.

The event was dignified and attended by representatives, including many leading figures from all of the political parties.

The moment passed but the distasteful assaults, attacks and intimidation continue.

The perpetrators are exploiting the fact that many ordinary people feel failed in so many ways by our government and political system.

And some are drawn into the clutches of those who may appear to offer a simple solution or an easy slogan - often imported from abroad and driven by the paid social media algorithm.

There is room in our country for everyone.

This is the land of Céad Míle Fáilte. We will not forget who we are - a welcoming people, even when we had little to give.

Solidarity is not charity. We don't welcome people to our shores out of charity. We do so because of our shared humanity.

But, our infrastructure and public services are failing to keep up as our population grows.

We lag behind other comparable European countries.

The booming economy, buoyant revenues and eye-watering company profits are not raising living standards.

We see it all around us.

- The lack of affordable housing and the locked-out generation.
- The unacceptable waiting lists for the provision of care and treatment to our most vulnerable.
- Difficulties accessing SEN support and therapy plans in our schools.
- The obscenity of homelessness so evident on our streets.
- The fear and vulnerability of so many, especially older people, who don't feel safe and protected in our communities.
- The decline of our cities. Dublin, which is so important for the country as a whole, stands out.

I could go on.

This is on successive governments. It's a failure of politics.

We cannot contemplate another government that continues this record.

At this critical moment for our country and our world, I believe that the trade union movement has a responsibility to provide leadership. As much as at any time before in the history of our great movement.

Not just to speak out more forcefully for ordinary people.

Not just to be clear that we are on their side.

But to provide the hope for the world that can save us from hate, conflict, and destruction.

Today, I am declaring that Fórsa will take a lead role in that endeavour.

- By calling out the deficits in policy and services where we see them.
- By pointing to the solutions and the processes to bring them about.
- By engaging our members directly to help us do it.

It's not good enough for politicians to look to the trade union movement at the moment of crisis. Like when Covid struck.

Social dialogue is meaningless unless it produces answers to real problems.

For far too long now governments have pursued an approach based mainly on ticking the box of consultation and presenting information on their own plans.

Sure - they listen to what we have to say, but it's clear that our influence is very limited.

The fact that tax relief on union subscriptions hasn't been restored tells a lot about what they really think of us.

The days of simply inviting us in when they want to talk or to pay lip service to our member's concerns have to stop.

It's another reason why we need to build our power.

When a relationship is so flawed and unequal, the best thing you can do is leave.

I'm not interested in being part of it anymore.

But I am interested in building a better Ireland. And I believe that our members are too.

The issues our members face are varied. As we move forward, we will organise to help them stand up and fight on the issues they decide must be addressed.

The issues that matter to you will drive us and together we'll make sure that government hears us.

Ireland has many social problems. But we are a wealthy country, and these problems can be fixed.

However, this requires a willingness on the part of the political system and the permanent government to park ideological mindsets.

And it will require a shift in how they interact with the trade union movement. It must be urgent, focused and involve us.

It also requires a move away from short termism to a more long-term vision for our country.

That was part of the thinking behind Fórsa commissioning TASC to produce the 2022 report on the post-pandemic state.

We have asked them to follow this up with further research to be published later this year.

You will see from the brief -some copies of which are available - that it will focus on the capacity and the need for increased public expenditure to address the challenges presented by the climate crisis, artificial intelligence, and the cost-of-living crisis as it affects essential workers.

There are opportunities too, provided that we plan for them. I believe that it is our responsibility to make this case and to build support for it.

That will require change and real commitment from the powers that be if it is to result in solutions.

Not just getting the occasional audience with government to voice our concerns.

During the pay talks we saw at first-hand what we are dealing with.

One of our priorities was to futureproof public services by establishing structures that would consider and address issues like the effect of the housing crisis on recruitment, an approach to AI that would improve jobs, and more creative family friendly working so that people with badly needed skills can balance work and caring responsibilities.

This was rejected out of hand by the Department officials claiming it was outside the scope of the process.

We even had the ludicrous experience where they argued for the removal of a reference to the relatively small size of the Irish public service even though we had lifted the text verbatim from the foreword to the Department's own strategy document published last year!

The opportunity to address the pay of new entrants to the public service was also spurned.

The government side had refused to remove the skipped points from the incremental pay scales.

So it made sense to ask them to remove the first two points for future entrants and allow them to proceed along the scale in the normal way.

But this was flatly rejected too.

That's why on the day that the deal was ratified I called on the government to address this as a matter of policy.

It would send an important message to our young people that we want them to help build up our public services.

At the lower levels it would help to keep public service pay rates clear of the living wage when it is introduced.

Even more importantly, it would give young people some chance of living independent lives when pursuing a public service career given the cost of accommodation.

It's also the right thing to do.

It's unrealistic to think that the current workforce should pay via local bargaining to sort out a problem that affects those not yet in the workforce.

The 3% local bargaining clause provides us with an opportunity to engage our members on the issues that affect **them** directly.

And that is what we will do in the coming weeks.

Like never before we will involve our members. Not just in relation to local bargaining but in future pay bargaining when current agreements are due to expire.

But we won't stop there.

We will also actively seek their help in standing up and speaking out.

For citizens.

For patients.

For children.

For clients.

For services users.

For everyone who depends on our work.

And we won't accept employer restrictions, such as the 'gagging' clause in the HSE employment contracts, designed to impede the public's right to information and ultimately better public services.

So in conclusion, we should be proud of what we have achieved together. We should realise that we need to prepare for the future by building high membership participation. And, we should send a signal from this conference that Fórsa intends to make a huge difference.

For our members and for our country.

That is what the next two years will be about. And we are going to do it. Together.

Go raibh maith agaibh go léir as do aire agus as do dhlúthpháirtíocht.

Ar aghaidh linn chun bua.