

Speech by Mike Jennings, General Secretary, IFUT.

ANNUAL DELEGATE CONFERENCE

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Delegates and Friends,

I have the honour of presenting the IFUT Annual Report for the year 2008/2009.

Inevitably as we gather here today as trade unionists and educators our thoughts are all focused on the calamitous state of our economy and equally on the brutally unfair and unjust measures to deal with it which are being imposed upon us.

Indeed, as I say in the introduction to the report, the current massive problems and challenges give an almost unreal feel to much of the content of the report dealing as it does with what might, with some irony, be called 'normal' industrial relations issues.

But before I deal with the big economic issues and their unfair and unacceptable effects, let me briefly refer to the generality of the work of IFUT in the past year as reflected in the pages of the report.

It is a solid report and contains much of which we can be proud. Personally I take particular satisfaction in our quite significant increase in membership. This growth in our numbers is reflected in practically every Branch and in every area of our reach, and I would like to thank all of those activists who have responded with such commitment to our national decision to focus on growing our numbers and hence our strength and influence.

Despite, perhaps even in some sense as a result of, the huge challenges we face next year, we can be reasonably confident of maintaining similar growth if we continue and even increase, the level of effort we have expended on this project to date.

We had other successes too. We scored some notable and deeply satisfying wins in the Labour Court and at Rights Commissioner Hearings. Some of these outcomes were focused primarily on individuals, while others had national or even international implications. All contributed to a sense that this union is not only fully 'alive' and active, but when it comes to tackling unfairness, abuse of procedure, hypocrisy, double standards, attacks on core academic values and so on, we are 'kicking' also. And we intend to keep on doing so.

One of the least welcome possible side effects of our successes in winning claims through procedures, is that too many HR Departments are now paying us the implied back-handed compliment of hiring the services of hugely expensive lawyers and barristers to do the work which these same departments are very well resourced to do themselves.

This is a disgraceful waste of public money.

Could anything be more galling and provocative than for our members, whose core job of providing a first class education to the youth of this nation is undermined and damaged every day by lack of investment, to be forced to witness the irresponsible use of thousands of euro as they are lavished on legal fees? This by HR Departments whose staff growth rates have outstripped all other departments in recent years by miles!

Just last week the IFUT Executive made a decision to highlight this scandalous waste of public funds in the coming year. And (dare I say it!?) when it comes to shining a torch on scandalous overspending in certain areas, this union 'has form'.

In a truly historical year IFUT members balloted for strike action not once but twice in 2008/2009. We balloted nationally on the economic measures taken against us across the board (of which more anon). But we also balloted in NUIM where our members took the principled stance of defending the rights of one individual – a Fixed-Term Contract Researcher. I will not repeat the details of this case here – they are referred to briefly in the report. But I will say this; the manner of NUIM's prosecution of this case has tarnished the name of that university and those responsible should now take time to reflect on whether they wish to drag this issue out even further by actions which clearly fly in the face of the letter and the spirit of the law which is supposed to protect fixed-term workers from unfair treatment.

And now, before I run out of time, I want to turn to the issues which are uppermost in the minds of every one of us – the Pension Levy, the Income Levy, the Health Levy and the Ban on Recruitment and Promotions.

How can any Government be so callous and so stupid that their response to a crisis (which, in both its national and global manifestations, was 100% the result of **private** greed) is to punish, in a highly disproportionate way, workers in the **public** sector? These same workers saw very little of the Boom that is now gone bust.

And also – in contradiction of all sane advice – as a bi-product they are prepared to inflict serious and perhaps irreparable damage to the education sector which everyone knows is one of the primary instruments to get us out of the enormous hole which we have been dug into.

Are we angry? You betcha we're angry! But now is a time for cool heads. Now is a time for a strategic approach not a knee-jerk response.

I hate the rain but I recognise when it is raining and I bring an umbrella.

Equally, I hate the fact that our opponents have done such a thorough job in whipping up an irrational hatred of public sector workers right across this country. I hate this but I see that this is a reality. Just look at the media reaction to the dignified and measured actions of our colleagues in the teacher unions two weeks ago when faced with a facile lecture from a man who has done serious damage not only to them as employees but to the education system itself which they love and serve so well.

We have to be willing and able to play a long game. Now is not the time (if ever there was one) for glorious defeats. We have to take our opportunities where we find them and when we are outgunned we have to preserve and build our strength.

I know many of you today might have come here hoping for 'fighting talk' from the General Secretary. Well, IFUT is up to the fight but, as behoves members of the profession we serve, we will do our fighting with our brains engaged and our eyes wide open.

We have our strengths and we will play to them. We know the challenge is big and that the stakes are very high, but we will be persistent. We may need to call on all of our reserves and patience and discipline, but ultimately we will turn things around.

We have to recognise that the current hostile climate is not just a backdrop to our disputes. It is a powerful weapon ready to be deployed against us. Defusing this anger – misguided though it is – will not be done by stunts or spectaculars. We will have to work at it. We will need to use our educating and communicating skills to make people see that damaging education and those who work in it damages the entire society.

When times are tough you have to know who your friends and allies are and work closely with them. I believe our friends and allies are to be found in the Teacher Unions and in Congress generally. We in IFUT will pay great attention to those friendships.

This is not a call to surrender. Nor is it an admission of defeat. It is a cold, clear analysis of the magnitude of the task facing us. The best way to ensure that we win is by being realistic and honest with ourselves about how much ground we have to make up.

But let us be positive. This union has been around for close to half a century. We have been in tough times before. We have the strengths and the qualities necessary to provide real leadership. And that is what we are going to do.

I commend this report for your adoption.

Thank you.