

Speech by Mike Jennings, General Secretary, IFUT.

ANNUAL DELEGATE CONFERENCE

24 APRIL 2010

Delegates and Friends,

I have the honour for the fourth time of presenting the IFUT Annual Report. This Report covers the period since our last ADC in April 2009.

This has been a hard and difficult year for IFUT members, just as it has been a hard and difficult year for the majority of Irish people.

It is not just the depressing economic climate we live in that is hard and difficult. It is not just that our economy has been mismanaged into a spectacular collapse. It is not just the loss of income imposed by a discriminating pension levy, by increases in taxes and by reductions in salary. It is not just the sense of missed opportunity – how could our Government have so wasted the resources of the Celtic Tiger years? Why have we so little by way of social infrastructure so show from our years of prosperity?

It is more than all of the above. There is no 'spirit of the blitz'. There is no sense that we have a common purpose. There is no sense that we have credible, respected leaders. Instead there's anger and there is shame. Anger at the extent of reckless and selfish behaviour on the part of the 'great and the good'. Shame at the fact that at a time when we need it most, our leaders are completely devoid of moral authority to lead us through these hard times.

And there is frustration, a palpable sense that no lessons have been learned, no one has gone to jail, and every day we see evidence that, if they are let, these same people will do the same things in the same way and with the same blithe disregard for their obligations to society.

And on top of all of this, for those of us who work in the Public Service (at the service of the public good), there is a constant belittlement of what we are, who we are and what we do.

I do not know how useful it is to do a taxonomy of victimhood. But it is the reality that every time a public servant complains about the chopping of his or her income they are told: "you should be grateful, at least you have a job".

And so, in this context, I am prepared to say today from this platform that the most victimised of our people are those who have lost their jobs or are unable to find jobs.

But it is important to say loud and clear that not one of these people was put out of their jobs because of our work in education or the work of colleagues in the health service or those providing social supports that any civilised society should regard as essential.

And it is also no harm to remind people that being in the Private Sector is not synonymous with either being unemployed or on the brink of it. Even the most luridly pessimistic estimates do not see unemployment going up to 20%. That means that the vast majority of workers in the Private Sector will hold on to their jobs. And they are entitled to them and should not be blamed for doing so nor regarded as being selfish for doing so. Nor are they responsible for the fact that the others are jobless. But if the employed Private Sector workers are blameless why should Public Sector workers be vilified as if we personally, and vindictively put people out of their jobs?

It is also a fact that, although hundreds of thousands of employees have had their salaries cut, there is only one sector of society, the Public Sector, where 100% of employees have all, every one of them, had not one but two major pay cuts.

I make these points not to add fuel to a Public versus Private Sector row, but to illustrate that it is a phony row.

Our members, I believe, could live with pay cuts – if they were fair. At every IFUT meeting I have attended in the past year, it was the issue of unfairness which rankled most.

Making do with income cuts of between 17% and 20% is not easy. It is hard. For those of our members with huge mortgages and for those in the early to mid-stages of their careers, it is very hard. Remember, most academics do not begin to earn salaries until five to seven years later than their peer group due to the length of time it takes to get qualified.

Does our childcare not cost the same? Are our grocery bills different to those of our neighbours? Do our light and heat come with a deduction for being public servants? Do we not need to travel to and from our places of work?

Yes, living with less is hard. But it would be less hard if it was fair. And I am not just talking about the psychological and emotional effect of feeling victimised and singled out. I am saying that if everyone on similar salary levels all had to contribute in the same proportion, then we could all be penalised less. And if our wealthy 'elite', those living here and those who dodge the burden of living here were to pay their fair share, what a difference that would make.

Speaking of those who, officially at least, are not resident here for tax purposes, whose visits here are often to have their photographs taken at some 'benevolent event';

imagine if we did a deal with them 'keep your charity and give us your tax instead' – what a difference that would make.

But these are the economic and political circumstances in which we find ourselves. Let us consider briefly what it was that IFUT members did in the past year.

We stayed true to the Congress policy that there is a “better fairer way”. We worked closely with, and maintained excellent relationships with, our colleague teacher unions. On November 24th we participated to a magnificent and wonderfully unified extent in the National Public Sector Stoppage.

By the way, on this issue I want to say that it was very unfair how certain categories of our members seem to have been a particularly soft target for a pay deduction in respect of the day, while others were not similarly affected. Also, it is completely unacceptable that university employees – unique amongst all professionals in the entire Education Sector - should have had a higher pay deduction exacted from them.

All of our protests and agitation were designed to bring our employer, the Government, back to the negotiating table. The result of the talks that followed is the “Croke Park Deal”.

These Proposals will be fully debated at this ADC this afternoon. Your Executive has already decided to recommend rejection of the Proposals. I do not propose to pre-empt that debate and so I will confine my remark here to the following.

There is often a cynical reaction by Governments as employers 'not to let a good crisis go to waste'. We could be seeing the same motives being played out now.

Many of the most objectionable aspects of the so-called 'transformation agenda' for higher education will not result in any significant financial savings.

Threats to our employment contracts, asking us to sign up, sight unseen, to a Higher Education Review Body Report which has not even been written yet, and attempts to make us spend endless wasted hours counting and accounting for every minute of our days, are not based on the need to spend money more wisely. They are petty, ideological inspired attacks on the whole fabric of a higher education system which some of our controllers have never understood and never valued.

It was said at one of our Executive meetings that “sometimes there are worse things than pay cuts”. The destruction of our academic contracts and the bureaucratic cheapening of our professional role is, our members may well decide, one of them.

This conference is the last in a series of conferences held by the four teacher unions. There will be no cheap and unsubstantiated jibes in tomorrow’s papers about ‘baying mobs chasing a terrified Minister’. No snippy, disdainful references to a decision not to applaud the Minister as if it was akin to throwing rotten fruit at her – a Minister whose address was peppered with justifications of attacks on her audiences’s living standards and professionalism.

In recent years IFUT ‘doesn’t do Ministers’, so we may miss out on some photo opportunities, positive or otherwise. But I do want to welcome Minister Mary Coughlan to her new job. It is tempting to remark that under the heading of understanding the higher education system and how it works, she could hardly fail to be an improvement on her predecessor.

And can I say to the Minister that if there are issues in higher education that she is concerned about and does not understand, she should come to us. And ask us and ask our University Managements and listen to our students. Who do you think is better able to speak knowledgeably about an issue such as Grade Inflation – the people who work in the system all their lives and days or the CEOs of two multi-national companies?

In short Minister, a little respect will go a long way and it will be reciprocated.

Finally, can I send this message to Minister Coughlan: ‘You have had a torrid time in your last portfolio. You must be glad to be out of there and I am sure it will be very tempting to use the last two years you will have as a Cabinet Minister to make your mark in education. But please do not rush in. Please consult with the stakeholders. Please listen and please do not go for stunts or cheap fixes. But above all, Minister, remember the first duty in the hippocratic oath “first, do no harm”.’

Colleagues, when I sat down to write this speech I was tempted to quote W B Yeats by way of illustrating what a depressing place our higher education system has been in the past period. At times it felt that the perspective of a General Secretary might be akin to that of “the old priest Peter Gilligan” who

“Was weary night and day:
for half his flock were in their beds,
or under green sods lay.”

But let’s not depress ourselves further and unnecessarily. Let me commend this report. Let me say with pride that it reflects the huge amount of work which this union, your union, does every day on behalf of our members, on behalf of higher education and for the common good.

The work described in the pages of our Annual Report is the work that IFUT does every day for the benefit and enhancement of our higher education system – a system which, despite all that is happening, still commands our respect and our loyalty. Mr Yeats might characterize an account of such efforts as being like spreading dreams at your feet ‘tread softly, for you tread on our dreams’.

Thank you.