

**Speech by Mike Jennings, General Secretary, IFUT.**

**ANNUAL DELEGATE CONFERENCE**

**16 APRIL 2011**

Colleagues, Delegates and Friends,

I have the honour of presenting the Annual Report for the year 2010/2011 for your approval. It is quite extraordinary that one full year after we last gathered here for our Annual Conference, our meeting is once again dominated by debate, formal and informal, on the 'Croke Park' Agreement.

This speech is not the appropriate vehicle for me to make arguments for or against the decisions on 'Croke Park' which we will make today, not least because the speech was drafted before the holding of the latest meeting with the Department of Education and representatives of the University Managements.

However, it is legitimate to look back over the events of the past year insofar as they relate to 'Croke Park' (CPA).

Our members' decision to reject the CPA was quite emphatic. The rationale for that decision was also quite clear. IFUT members were deeply distrustful of the open-ended, pig-in-a-poke nature of the proposals. Simply stated, we were not going to sign a blank cheque drawn on the entire range of our conditions of employment.

It was true that some of these unspecified changes which we were being asked to accept sight unseen might turn out to be fairly innocuous or at least tolerable given the dire straits we find ourselves in. However, our members, on the advice of the Executive,

also had to consider the possibility that, if given the opportunity to do so, our 'Managers' might devise proposals which would amount to what I have repeatedly called 'the 3am nightmare' scenario.

In point of fact, it is sad to report that our worst suspicions were justified when we witnessed the tabling of proposals which, if implemented, would have done enormous damage to the core and essential characteristics of a university.

At the time of writing there was reason to be optimistic that most, if not all, of these more dangerous and objectionable proposals have been defeated. And if so, then IFUT and IFUT alone, deserves great credit for the service we have once again rendered in the defence of 'traditional university values'.

But regardless of the outcome of today's discussions, the battle is far from over. There is an ongoing, very real threat not only to the viability of our higher education institutions as a result of the critical budgetary situation and staff reductions, but also a threat to the very profession of academics.

Our honoured guest today Professor Ulrich Teichler of the University of Kassel in Germany, will give us some extremely interesting information concerning issues such as managerialism, loss of collegiality, and emphasis on short-termism and utilitarianism in education goals. But I would like to concentrate on one particular aspect of the undermining of academics i.e. the destruction of job security, the disdain for tenure (or even 'normal' permanency) and the huge growth in the prevalence of fixed-term and contingent employment.

In the report for which I am seeking your approval you will see that we have listed no fewer than eleven separate disputes in which we have been involved which deal with exploitation arising from fixed-term employment. In fact, this number could be even higher as we have not listed some additional cases which have just been initiated but which, no doubt, we will be forced to fight up to the exhaustion of all procedures.

Reading this sad litany of disputes it is both perplexing and instructive to recall that it is only a matter of 8 years ago that the Oireachtas passed a law which had as its explicit purpose and intent, the eradication (or as a minimum the substantial reduction) of insecurity of employment.

Even allowing for the economic catastrophe into which our country has been mismanaged, it is nonetheless nothing short of sheer arrogance that the HEA and the universities should now introduce an explicit rule that all new employment will be on a fixed-term or fixed-purpose basis. This is a direct challenge to Irish law and to the European Directive and Framework Agreement upon which that law is based. It is quite clear to me that this abuse of Fixed-Term Contracts will be a huge source of industrial relations litigation and disputation in the years ahead.

Delegates, it is almost incredible that not only are our universities – at the behest of the HEA – ignoring the wishes of the Irish Oireachtas by making insecure, contingent employment the new norm, but, in fact, some universities are even turning simple logic on its head by insisting that employees who have gained the status of being employed on a Contract of **Indefinite** Duration are still being dismissed on the basis of the occurrence of a **definite** event.

In this regard I would like to publicly call upon our new Minister for Education, who during the course of his career was once a highly respected and fair Minister for Labour with direct responsibility for issues such as this, to instruct all Public Sector employers and particularly the universities and other HEI's to obey both the letter and the spirit of the 2003 Protection of Employees (Fixed-Term Work) Act.

The abuses which I have referred to above have been visited upon IFUT members working as Lecturers and Librarians. However, the greatest concentration of abusive treatment is to be found in the universities' dealings with Researchers.

There are almost 4,000 Research post holders in the Higher Education Sector. Very few of these are members of, or have had the protection of, a trade union. This fact is directly linked to their treatment as 'second-class employees'.

But consider the hypocrisy and the inconsistency at play here. We constantly hear high-minded pronouncements about the need for a "smart economy". Calls are made over and over again for Ireland to be more involved in research and for our children to be encouraged to pursue careers in this area.

And yet, what is the reality? Thousands of young, gifted Researchers being forced to live in a state of constant insecurity and never being encouraged to think of their jobs as anything more than a transitory short-term thing from which they will derive little recognition, poor pay levels and no thanks or loyalty from their employers.

This is an area of exploitation which IFUT is committed to working hard on and I would urge each and every one of you to play your part by making Researchers welcome in our union and encouraging them to join in significant numbers.

As I come to the end of this address, I hope you will permit me to indulge in a little bit of self praise. This report is evidence of a huge volume of work which – apart from the incredibly generous input from unpaid, voluntary representatives, has all been done by two people i.e. Phyllis Russell our extraordinary Office Manager and myself.

It is a reality that such levels of effort (and indeed the additional efforts which will be required to meet the many challenges we face in the future) are simply not sustainable. It is for that reason that I am enormously grateful to the IFUT Executive and Council for consistently and repeatedly supporting the case for the employment of an Assistant General Secretary.

It is a source of immense satisfaction for me to be able today to introduce you to Ms Joan Donegan who, on 3 May next, will join the staff of IFUT as Assistant General

Secretary. I have known Joan for many years and I know her ability and her capacity for hard work. I predict that in a very short period of time each one of you will have cause to recognise, and be grateful for, the application of these talents to the work of this union.

I would like to thank all the Executive and Council Members and the Branch Secretaries and other representatives for their hard work over the past year. Especially I want to thank our Outgoing President, Dr Hugh Gibbons for his great service in that post over the past two years, and I warmly welcome and congratulate Dr Marie Clarke as she succeeds Hugh as President.

Finally, I will finish as always by paying the warmest possible tribute to our uniquely dedicated and brilliant Office Manager, Phyllis Russell without whom, absolutely literally, none of the work referred to in this report would have been possible.

I commend the report. Thank you.