

New trade proposals a threat to education and could cost Irish taxpayer ‘countless millions,’ joint teachers’ union statement warns

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Proposals to make education a ‘traded’ commodity could cost the Irish taxpayer ‘countless millions’, by allowing investors in ‘for-profit’ colleges to sue the government for loss of profit as a result of state investment in public education, a joint statement from all four Irish teachers’ unions warns

Pat King, General Secretary of ASTI, Mike Jennings, General Secretary of IFUT, John MacGabhann, General Secretary of TUI and Sheila Nunan, General Secretary of INTO have issued the warning regarding current talks between the US and the EU to make education a traded commodity as part of talks on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP).

Under a proposed ‘investor-state dispute resolution process’ in TTIP, so-called ‘for-profit’ education companies would have the right to challenge measures that they feel interfere with their profits.

If an investor wins such a case, before a panel of private, unaccountable arbitrators, the host state could be liable to hand over ‘countless millions’ of euro in compensation.

A US Congressional Report in 2012 was damning of the ‘for-profit’ education sector there, citing a 64% dropout rate. It found that over 22% of their revenue was spent on marketing and 19.4% taken in profits – with just 17% spent on instruction. The study, carried out over two years, reported "substandard academic offerings, high tuition and executive compensation, low student retention rates and the issuance of credentials of questionable value."

The four teachers’ unions leaders state “The concern for education standards is the very reason why education has to date remained one of the least-covered sectors in the various trade agreements. These ‘for-profit’ ventures that have been substantially discredited in the US and now seeking to enter the Irish and European markets, with potentially disastrous consequences for our students and education system.”

The TTIP proposals, heavily promoted by the US ‘for-profit’ lobby, would effectively prevent regulation of these ‘for-profit’ schools and institutions on the basis that it would represent a “disguised barrier to trade.”

“The recent closures of private English language colleges should serve as a stark warning to the government not to accede to the demands of the ‘for-profit’ education,” Pat King, Mike Jennings, John MacGabhann and Sheila Nunan, state

“Ireland should push the European Commission to demand an explicit exclusion of education in the talks.

“The EU Foreign Affairs Council of Ministers has already excluded the audiovisual sector from TTIP based on the public interest goal of preserving and promoting cultural and linguistic diversity within the EU. The same reasoning would justify an exemption for education from the TTIP,” they say.

Education International, which represents 30 million education workers worldwide, has already written to both President Obama and José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission to express its alarm at the risks posed for education.

In the letter the organisation has requested that teacher, student, educational and relevant regulatory bodies be fully informed and consulted on the talks.

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