

Trade unions must adapt to survive, IFUT General Secretary tells Conference

May 10th, 2019.

Trade unions must adapt to the needs and issues of young people who have grown up largely in a generation where union membership is simply not the norm, Joan Donegan, General Secretary of the Irish Federation of University Teachers, said in her address to the Annual Delegate Conference of IFUT, Dublin, Saturday, May 11th, 2019.

“As we discuss strategy for the 2020’s, it is important to acknowledge that, overall, trade union membership numbers are declining sharply.

OECD figures suggest Ireland’s union membership figures dropped to between 23% to 27% in 2016, depending on the data used, from 36% in 2010.

The reasons are complicated, but we can hardly argue that the men and women who fought for trade union rights in the 19th century had it easy!

IFUT’s membership happily continues to grow and expand. One reason is that we give priority to focusing on the issue of precarious employment in higher education. Many of the people we take cases for feel isolated, alone and in fear of unemployment.

The key is to focus on those workers whose very marginalisation keeps them out of union membership. Information is so poor that we do not even know how many staff are precariously employed in our universities.

They might as well be statistically redacted from society!

Trade unions must speak and, more importantly, listen to these workers in their language, not in the often very, very staid language of the branch committee meeting or minutes.

We must learn again to respond quickly to the immediate and real needs of real people, whenever, however and wherever they arise.

Because, in fact, trade unions do deliver a lot!

A 2015 detailed study on 'Inequality and Labour Market Institutions' by the International Monetary Fund - hardly a friend of the trade union movement - showed a clear link between unionisation and reduced income inequality as unions lift the wages of the lowest paid.

Trade unions must also learn to work together better. This is an area where the Irish Congress of Trade Unions can play an effective role.

Finally, we need to recognise and celebrate our victories better. And to appreciate that, in addition to the pile of problems that arrive daily at our desks, there is a parallel mountain of achievement, success and inspiration within the membership of all trade unions.”

ENDS