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Fórsa Civil Service Division Conference 2018

Chairperson's address

NIALL McGUIRK

Sisters and brothers, I have immense pride and a sense of honor standing before you today. This is an historic year for us here in Fórsa and for you at this conference. It is the inaugural Civil Service Division Conference; some might say the holy trinity, where three becomes one. For each of our respective unions we had our own conference and our own way of doing things.

Last April I was elected president of PSEU, and some of the delegates here may have been at that conference. I'm addressing you as Chair of the Civil Service Division today. Also in attendance today we have the former CPSU President, Ann McGee, and former Chair of the old Impact Civil Service Division, Kieran Sheehan. All three of us have worked as part of the 53 member Civil Service Divisional Executive. We have sought to ensure that voices are still heard in the larger grouping and whilst that can be hard as meetings do have to end sometime, I would like to acknowledge all that Ann, Kieran and the rest of the executive have done to keep us progressing.

And we have had a lot of issues to keep progressing. Shortly after our conferences last year our officials entered into early negotiations into what was to become the Public Service Stability Agreement. Whilst the Lansdowne Road agreement had started to stop the haemorrhaging of our terms and conditions since 2008, the PSSA put us on a proper path towards restoration and the unwinding of the FEMPI legislation. Our respective executives were aware that this provided for restoration of salary but still left questions around many things, specifically our pensions and working hours. Cautious approval was the order of the day as what were then three respective unions voted to accept the PSSA. However, as we can see by the many motions put in front of us today, we still have a long way to go. We will not rest easy until these outstanding issues are progressed.

We will see 2% of pay restoration being achieved this year, with more accruing over the next two years. Delegates at many of our recent conferences have made the point that the so-called pension levy – imposed by government diktat in 2009 – had no relation to public service pensions. It was merely a tax on public

sector incomes. In successive negotiations, we have taken more and more civil servants out of the pension levy net.

When it was first imposed, we paid the levy on all earnings over €15,000 a year. Under the PSSA, this ceiling will have increased to €34,500 – ie, more than doubled – by 1st January 2020. That means anyone earning below €34,500 will no longer pay any levy. And those earning more will pay the levy on a significantly smaller proportion of their income.

Last summer's PSSA talks were a dangerous time for pensions, because the Government entered those talks in a mind to attack the value of public service pensions. It had already passed – though not triggered – legislation to allow pensions be indexed to inflation instead of the existing link between pensions and salaries. And it had dropped heavy hints about calculating all pensions on the basis of 'career average' earnings, instead of final salary-based pension now in place for most.

Our unions – now our union – came out of those talks with an agreement that stopped both these measures, which would have substantially reduced the value of pensions. The price for this was that those earning over €34,500 a year will see the remainder of their pension levy still in place – but appearing on payslips as an 'additional pension contribution.' In other words, that extra contribution is now explicitly linked to pensions.

Let's be clear – civil and public servants have always paid for their pensions. We pay PRSI – and for most public servants, the state pension that PRSI buys makes up the biggest part of retirement income. We pay an additional 6.5% of salary towards our occupational pension. On top of that, we have paid the pension levy for almost a decade. This is an average 7% contribution – more for higher earners – and many will continue to pay this as an 'additional pension contribution,' even after the PSSA expires. This is a fair trade-off that should lay the matter of public service pensions to rest.

We will be keeping a very careful eye on this over the next number of years, just as we will be supporting demands for better pension provision for all workers, regardless of the sector they happen to be employed in.

It has been acknowledge that there is a real issue around new entrants' pay and again this is reflected in the motions ahead of us. And yes this is not the only issue we are facing. Whilst the extra leave for those EO's and Co's with longer service is to be welcomed we have to ensure this is reflected across all our grades. This is an issue that has arisen in our Civil Service Division and is one we are seeking to rectify.

The wall that is working time is one topic that was difficult to breach in the successor to Haddington Road. I am well aware of the discomfort this is causing many of our members, a discomfort reflected in a number of motions to this conference. These motions [MOTIONS 35-42] demand that the union keeps this issue on the agenda in future talks. I fully support the principal that working time must remain a key Fórsa objective – along with other priorities like new entrants, pay equity and wider improvements in income for all the people we represent.

I acknowledge the limited advances that were made in the PSSA deal – the provision to reduce hours at a cost to the member, and the facility to convert some leave into flexitime. These help, but they are not a return to the pre-crisis situation. I understand the point that – on a public-service wide basis – a return to pre-Haddington road hours could add a substantial sum to the public service pay bill. But, when we debate this later this afternoon, I expect us to send a message to our negotiators that this issue means a lot to very many of our members. We know that there are competing demands on what can be achieved in negotiations, but working time cannot, and will not, fall off the table.

No sooner had our respective unions voted to cautiously accept the PSSA and we swiftly moved on to the business that had until then been called the “New Union Project”. A rule book and instrument of amalgamation were finally drafted. A membership benefit package was agreed and meetings were set up around the country to discuss what was to become Fórsa with our membership. Again the discussions around union executives were fraught with difficulties as people with very real and strong allegiances to their way of operating for years were being asked to change. As President of the PSEU, I relished the opportunity of being part of a union with 80.000 people.

As a member of the PSEU for 19 years I had a sense of sadness and trepidation moving away. Doing things a certain way for all that time became habit forming and it is hard to break habits. I know many of my colleagues formerly in CPSU and IMPACT had and many still have similar fears. Most of us didn't join a trade union because of the name of it. We joined, as it was the best way to collectively protect and improve our terms and conditions of employment. . As the years developed and we became active in our respective unions, that loyalty to not only one another but to our organisations developed. In recent years it has become more difficult in some ways to be a trade union activist as some of the many terms and conditions that the union movement had been very successful in obtaining over many years were eroded. We had to stand united in our attempts to keep our unions strong whilst there was a mantra of doing more for less being heralded at every opportunity.

That collective has increased vastly now that we are in Fórsa. After being put to ballot, a large majority voted to accept becoming 1 union and on Jan 2 Fórsa was born. A new force in Irish trade unionism

We now have amalgamated as organisations and need to find a way of accommodating all strands into our new structures. It is very early days and as is only right some of these accommodations are being vigorously checked. We need to work through teething problems and find solutions in the best interest of all our members. Yes there are issues, but there is a sense that we want to get this right. We want to work together. We have close to 700 people here as delegates. Imagine the power of potential in a room of 700 people. 700 people all working together for what's just and right. We represent 30,000 Civil Servants. We are part of a larger organisation representing 80,000 people. . Let us individually reach out, set ourselves a target of recruiting just one person. Convince them of the benefit in working collectively as we try and increase our number. There is power in a union sisters and brothers. Let us believe that.

It was very noticeable for me at our first Civil Service Divisional Executive how much potential we had. We were finally in the same room as our colleagues in government departments, hearing their issues around outsourcing, government decisions on shared services, working hours and pensions. These are all very common areas for each of our groupings.

There is potential amongst the wider public services for us to listen to and share experiences with clerical and admin workers in local authorities, educational facilities, health boards and beyond. Of course there is a chance that the issues pertinent to smaller branches in previous organisations somehow start to fall on deaf ears. That is when each of us needs to step up and speak up for those. Fórsa wasn't created to ignore any workplace issue; it exists to find workable solutions to all issues.

Since our coming together in January this year there have been many meetings of committees and groups. At times it is extremely to even attend work. We have had initial meetings of our Diversity/Equality/Disability Committees, our Global Solidarity/International Committees, our equivalent grades committees, our youth committees. We have had some of our members signing up for Branch Campaigns' Officers meeting. We have had monthly meetings of both our Civil Service Division and National Executives. Each of these meetings gives us a chance to put forward your issues, our conference over the next 2 days and our National Conference next month will feed into the conversation as we build policy for Fórsa.

Personally speaking, as an attendee of all these meetings I have to give special thanks to my work colleagues and my place of employment. I work in IT in Dept

of Taoiseach and my employer has always been reasonable when I have requested leave to attend such meetings. My work colleagues, all members of Fórsa now, have been extremely accommodating when I'm sure frustration kicks in for them at times.

I am a family man with three children. All my family have been extremely supportive and I wish to acknowledge that support. It is difficult at times to miss events like Parent teacher meetings or school plays for union meetings but we have the potential to effect positive change in the workplace which can serve to benefit this next generation.

I mention family but nowhere was this really obvious to me than in February of this year. The man who introduced me to trade unionism by not allowing me on St Patrick's Day 1979 to enter McDonalds on O'Connell Street to use their bathroom, as there was a picket outside, passed away on Feb 16. He was a shop steward in SIPTU and although a practicing Catholic his main Commandment was "Thou Shalt never cross a picket line". "Once workers speak you must listen to them" That man was my father but when I was feeling the cold touch of his skin in the days following his passing I was simultaneously feeling the warm embrace of the trade union family. 'An injury to one is a concern to all' is a labour slogan stretching back to the early days of our movement. My injury of joining the club that is those who have lost a loved one was of concern to many of our members. For weeks I was receiving cards and messages offering support at a time when the only comfort was not in what people were saying but the fact they were saying it. There is strength in the collective, we need to grasp that strength and move forward with force.

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