

Address by Fórsa General Secretary, Kevin Callinan, to the SIPTU BDC on 9 October 2019 at City Hall, Cork

Brothers and Sisters

It is an honour to address your BDC. Thank you for the opportunity.

At the outset I want to acknowledge the huge contribution of your outgoing General Secretary, Joe O'Flynn, both to SIPTU and as Congress Treasurer since 2002.

I also want to recognise my close colleagues Joe Cunningham, with whom I serve as an Officer of Congress, and John King, my negotiating partner on the Public Services Committee.

Of course, like so many of my Fórsa colleagues who work with SIPTU counterparts on a daily basis, I enjoy good relations with a wide range of SIPTU staff and representatives.

The bond between our two unions is strong. In recent times it has become even stronger.

In 2007 we concluded a Co-operation Agreement and a related Spheres of Influence Agreement. Last year we refreshed and renewed that commitment.

These words will need to be matched with actions if we are to successfully meet the challenges we face.

Many of these challenges are identified in the motions that form the agenda that you have been debating this week.

I particularly like the conference strapline – 'Respect at work, dignity in life.' Both are under threat.

And under threat at a time when our movement's ability to influence policy and events has been compromised.

Compromised in part, due to the failure to replace the collapse of social partnership in 2009 with an effective alternative strategy.

Whatever its failings, and there were many, social partnership provided a mechanism to engage in genuine social dialogue with the aim of crafting policy solutions to national problems.

What eventually replaced it, in the form of the Labour Employer Economic Forum, is more about meeting the obligations under the revised EU governance arrangements than genuine collaboration.

We can't fully assess these developments without taking account of growing inequality and the increased share of wealth going to capital over labour.

In the early years of social partnership the 1990 Industrial Relations Act became law resulting in a huge reduction in strike days. To an extent the apparatus of social partnership helped to fill the void and to provide stability to the changed conditions.

The legislation tilted the balance towards employers but the existence of the institution of social partnership provided a measure of redress to unions and their members.

The collapse of social partnership when the crisis hit removed this balance.

I am not saying social partnership was a panacea – I have been critical of its deficits and the missed opportunities on the union side – but I think that this point about the delicate balance that prevailed for almost twenty years is an important one from the point of view of plotting the way forward.

We are starting to hear calls for the repeal of the Industrial Relations Act.

Little wonder then that this is the case when many employers adopt employment practices that stretch the limits of what the law permits. And some have no compunction in using their ample resources to run to the courts to impede unions and workers from invoking the right to strike in what effectively becomes a test of the respective financial position of both parties – one that no union can win.

When the latter scenario becomes reality it is time for decisive action to restore fairness to the relationship between capital and labour.

My message to you, and to the government, is that trade unions will not be silent on this fundamental question. The law must be changed to ensure not just the right to organise but the right to bargain effectively. Otherwise it will have no credibility and little acceptance.

One of the most significant interventions that I have heard in a long time came a few weeks ago from an unlikely source.

On 17 September 2019 at the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation's conference to mark the ILO centenary, while speaking on a panel with the Director General Guy Ryder and Patricia King, IBEC CEO Danny McCoy delivered a devastating critique of Irish infrastructural capacity while making the case for genuine social dialogue.

Albeit couched in a concern for long-term national competitiveness, he highlighted a range of failings including the decline in the standing of our universities, the exorbitant cost of childcare, the excessive commutes for so many and the absence of effective solutions to the housing crisis.

I put it to you that real social dialogue just might resolve, or at least improve, these issues where government has failed.

My view of our trade union role is a simple one. Let me tell you a story.

A few years ago my union commissioned a report on why membership density was so low in some of our grades despite the fact that the union had done well for them in terms of pay and conditions.

Part of the exercise involved market research. The company involved arranged a series of focus groups comprised of people who worked in the grades but who were declared non-union members.

You know how it works? The sessions are 90 minutes long with a professional facilitator working through a prepared script of questions.

I went along one night to observe one of these sessions. It was so informative I stayed for a second one immediately after. The participants are told that they are being monitored by video link but they quickly forget.

Two things stood out. Despite what one might think there was no real hostility to the idea of joining a union – a few quibbles maybe.

So then, the facilitator put it to one of them, why wouldn't you join? The answer was greeted with furious nods of approval from the others:

- they don't understand us
- they don't feel our pain, and
- they don't speak out on our behalf

For me this summed up and chimed with what I had been preaching within the union for years:

- we have to be relevant
- we have to be empathetic, and
- we have to be visible

This applies to our role in wider society as much as it does to union members.

Which is why I am pleased and proud to Chair the Congress Steering Group that is trying to pioneer local trade union centres, combining the work of the ONE project and local trades councils.

We must be connected to the concerns of workers and their local communities; we must be on their side; and we must be available to them.

Progress has been slow, painfully so. Too slow.

So it will fall to SIPTU and to Fórsa, and to other like-minded unions, to drive this project on. Because failure to build this relevance, connection and visibility will severely affect the ability of our movement to influence events.

But if we adopt a true spirit of active co-operation coupled with a renewed determination it can make the decisive difference.

And we can start to build the confidence necessary to achieve a fair deal for workers on this island.

The two largest unions working in tandem in a common endeavour. With a fresh vision, a new strategy and a shared purpose.

At this historic juncture for our movement and our country that should be our commitment.

Brothers and sisters, thank you for your time and attention and I wish you every success for the rest of your conference and the period ahead.
