

PNS/CC

24th March 2022

Ms Patricia King
General Secretary
ICTU

By email to: patricia.king@ictu.ie

Re: Wearing of Face Masks

Dear Patricia,

I am writing today in connection with the call by the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation earlier this week for public health advice to be issued in relation to the wearing of face masks in indoor and crowded settings including public transport.

As you know, nurses and midwives are once again finding themselves in the most challenging of working environments, our hospitals are the most overcrowded they have been since the pandemic began and we are seeing an extraordinary number of patients in our hospitals diagnosed with COVID. To this end, the INMO is calling for affiliates of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions to show solidarity with our nurses and midwives, and other healthcare workers and encourage their members to once again wear masks in indoor and crowded settings.

Since the mask mandate was removed on February 28th, we have seen 8,953 patients without a bed in Irish hospitals. 27% of those who have been without a bed in our hospitals since the mask mandate was dropped have presented at our hospitals since last Monday (21st March 2022). This is staggering.

The INMO is calling for the reintroduction of masks not just as a public health measure, but as a workplace health and safety issue affecting nurses and midwives. The impact on COVID transmission among healthcare workers is stark, with a disproportionate infection rate throughout the healthcare workforce since the start of the pandemic and now 154 outbreaks in healthcare and residential institutions.

Moreover, failure to stem the spread of COVID-19 in Ireland has a direct impact on the ability of HCWs to receive their basic entitlements under the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997 and in accordance with their employment contracts, with recent surveys showing 98% of

members in Emergency Departments were unable to leave work on time, and 91% stating they were working or available during their scheduled breaks.

The increase in COVID-19 cases places a disproportionate burden on frontline healthcare workers which is directly endangering workers' lives, shortening careers, and causing lasting psychological and physical damage among those caring for patients.

According to research by the ESRI published this week, two-thirds of Irish people are still continuing to do the right thing and wear masks while shopping or on public transport. The links between mask-wearing and decreasing COVID transmission are well established. In absence of government taking action and responding to the calls of the INMO, we believe it is imperative now for the trade union movement to do what the Government will not and call on people to go back once again to basics – wear masks when indoors, on public transport and in a crowded setting.

The level of burnout among members of trade unions representing Health care workers is extremely high. They have been firefighting on so many fronts non-stop for the last twenty-four months. We need to do everything we can to show solidarity and call for the protection of those working in patient-facing roles in our hospitals and in the community as their employer is reluctant to intervene until it is too late.

Therefore, I would be grateful if this correspondence was circulated among affiliates and that this request is simply that all trade unions encourage working people to once again wear masks to show solidarity with our healthcare workers and allow them some chance to carry out their work safely.

Thank you for your attention to this note.

Is Mise,

PHIL NÍ SHEAGHDHA
General Secretary
[Electronic Transmission – No Signature]

cc: Kevin Callinan, President Irish Congress of Trade Unions