

THE DELEGATE

Newsletter of the Bray & District Council of Trade Unions

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PATRICIA KING BOWS OUT

The Council has extended its very best wishes to local woman, Patricia King, as she steps down from the position of General Secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. During her term as General Secretary Patricia remained in close contact with the Council, and we were particularly pleased to have her as special guest, in her capacity as Congress General Secretary, at the centenary celebrations in 2017.

Kilmacanogue woman, Patricia, has been, says Council President, Mary Diskin, a trailblazer throughout her working life. "From her earliest days in employment she had been a committed union activist and shop steward as was most evident when she was employed in the car assembly industry. Throughout more than 30 years representing both public and private employees Patricia has demonstrated true grit in promoting and protecting the rights of workers." said Mary.

Having been appointed as the SIPTU Dublin Regional Organiser in 2004 she was elected as Vice-President of SIPTU in 2010. This was the most prominent post held by a woman in the union up to then. In 2015, she became the first woman to be elected as General Secretary of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions.

Under her leadership ICTU has taken a strong stand in relation to low pay and the rights of workers to a proper living wage. In pursuit of this aim the two ICTU nominees, before the recent budget, broke ranks with the Low Pay Commission and issued a minority report to provide the government with an alternative and superior recommendation for the increase in the minimum wage 2023.

“Decent wages for all workers are central to resolving the cost-of-living crisis” was King’s main argument when launching the ICTU Budget Priorities 2023. But, argued King, when responding to the Tax and Welfare Commission findings in September, “all workers and households must be insulated from poverty, not only during the cost-of-living crisis, but at all times”. For King, insulation from poverty is pivoted on a fair taxation system, which no longer retains “tax supports that favour high-income individuals and businesses”, and which “can generate sufficient and sustainable revenue to meet the long-term expectations and needs of workers in terms of free at the point of use universal public services and income supports that secure living standards during breaks in employment”.

The Council is particularly mindful, says Mary, of the standing ovation Patricia received at the 2019 Biennial Delegate Conference in Belfast, when in reply to the then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar, she spoke with empathy and understanding of the then serious housing crisis and the damage to children living in hubs and hotel accommodation. Three years later and notwithstanding the emotional and psychological damage done to many of our children by Covid, there are 3,220 homeless children in the Republic.

The Council also congratulates Owen Reidy who has been appointed as the incoming general secretary of ICTU and looks forward to working closely with him and Congress over the next number of years in continuing the legacy left by Patricia and defending the rights of workers and their families.

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BUDGET 2023

An interesting and lively debate took place on the Budget 2023 measures at the Council meeting on Wednesday, 5th October, with the general view that not enough was done to tackle the long-term issues, such as housing and homelessness.

Opening the discussion, President Mary Diskin referred to the prior decision of the Government to accept the recommendation of the Low Pay Commission to increase the National Minimum Wage to €11.30 per hour. The recommendation was opposed by the two Congress representatives on the Commission who issued a minority report claiming the rate should be €12 per hour, as the increase fails to vindicate the living standards of low paid workers and represents a cut in real terms.

She also referred to the failure of the Budget to include anything on housing or efforts to prevent workers becoming homeless. The proposed vacant tax will be self-assessed, have a large number of exemptions, will not apply to derelict properties, and will be set at a rate three times the Local Property Tax. The 'Help to Buy' scheme will continue despite the Minister for Finance publishing a report on Budget Day which states, among other things, that the "scheme promotes demand for new housing in a market where the problems that exist are unequivocally supply constraint."

€1.7 billion will be allocated for 9,100 new build social homes for next year whereas Social Justice Ireland considers that this allocation will be insufficient to reach this target never mind that the real need is 14,000 new social homes per annum. There is also no ban on evictions. She also referred to the spiraling energy costs, and all indications are that more and more households will fall into energy poverty.

The Chair concluded her remarks by referring to the massive challenges in public health and care for the elderly. Also, the challenges facing boards of management in keeping schools open and the financial challenges for parents in sending their children to school. However, the greatest challenge for some

children will be trying to do homework in cold, overcrowded homes or worse still in hubs.

Ian Mc Gahon (SIPTU) stated that the vulnerable communities are worse off in the housing crisis and the one-off payments are only sticking plasters and not a long-term response to tackling poverty. "Hopefully, a referendum on the constitutional right to housing will raise the level of debate on the issue" he concluded.

John Anderson (Mandate) agreed and stated that the temporary measures for energy and rents are not a solution to the issue. John Douglas (Mandate) stated that we should not be surprised as we have a conservative government that privatised public housing provision, and we have serious problems with energy security and Health provision. "In housing, Vulture Funds are bleeding us dry and is not a long-term solution as we are only playing into developers' hands. Unless we stand up, we are wasting our time", he added.

Colm Kinsella (Unite) stated that the most startling statistic is the alarming rise in homelessness for children. "You cannot blame everything on the Ukraine war. It is down to pure greed and the Trade Union Movement has to stand up and show leadership" he added.

Margaret Moynihan (Unite) pointed out that charities and benevolent societies, such as the Vincent de Paul, are being relied on to deal with the crisis but it should be a properly coordinated response. It needs a more focused and overarching response. We are too fragmented and piecemeal about the crisis.

Concluding the debate, the Chair agreed that much of the debate is around the housing crisis and many families are under pressure because of this, and problems such as 'house surfing'. Many have stories that are horrendous. As a society we are very quiet about it, but we have to show that we are serious, whether this is by marching or whatever. It was agreed that the Executive will consider the points raised during the lengthy debate.

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COUNCIL CALLS FOR REFERENDUM ON PUBLIC OWNERSHIP OF WATER SERVICES

The Council is supporting the Trade Union campaign for the Government to deliver on its commitment and set a date for a referendum on the continued public ownership of water services to ensure against any future privatisation of this essential national utility.

Proposing the motion on behalf of SIPTU at the October meeting, Kieron Connolly stated that the purpose of the campaign is to ensure that the Government deliver on the commitment given in the document published by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in July 2022 entitled '*Irish Water Transformation Wider Policy*' to bring forward the proposed wording of a referendum on the public ownership of water services later this year or early in 2023.

It is also stated in the document that the Government will run a referendum on the public ownership of water services in tandem with a referendum on the right to housing. "This referendum is important to provide a constitutional guarantee that water services will remain in public ownership into the future", stated Mr. Connolly. The motion was adopted unanimously by the Council.

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SEAMUS COSTELLO - 45th ANNIVERSARY OF HIS DEATH (5th OCTOBER 2022)



(Vice-President, Mick Ryan, lays a wreath on behalf of the Council)

The Council held a trade union wreath laying ceremony to commemorate the 45th anniversary of the death of former president Seamus Costello.

The ceremony took place in St. Peter's cemetery, Little Bray, on Sunday, 9th October, with a march behind the Council banner from the cemetery gate to the graveside. Other trade union flags were also present (Mandate, SIPTU and Unite).

A wreath was laid on behalf of the Council by Vice-President Mick Ryan and was followed by the playing of 'Róisín Dubh' on the tin whistle by Antóin Mac Roibín (SIPTU). Council Secretary, Kieron Connolly gave the following oration.

"We are here to remember Seamus Costello who was murdered in the North Strand in Dublin 45 years ago this week - on the 5th of October 1977. We are here more particularly to remember a former trade union colleague - Seamus Costello the trade union activist.

A member of the Bray Branch of the ITGWU since 1962, Seamus was a delegate from his union on the Bray & District Trades Union Council from 1967 until his untimely death.

During this period, and despite his role locally and nationally as a political activist, he played a prominent role in the affairs of the Council. He served on the Executive Committee for a number of years, serving as Vice-President in 1975 and unanimously elected President in 1976, the year before his death. His term as President was an active one for the Council and included the Unemployed Protest March in the town which was supported by various groups from around the country.

In his tribute to Seamus at the time of his death, Council President Ross Connolly stated, "His chairmanship was marked by fairness and a warm, if sardonic, good humour, although he never neglected a chance to drive home his philosophy. He used his office, and indeed his status as an elected Councilor, to continually emphasise the importance of the Trades Union Council as the representative body of the area's trade unionists."

Ross also added; "His early views on the role and function of the trade union movement may at times have been naive, but there can be no gainsaying his sincerity or his genuine concern for the working class. It was not simply a concern to serve them as a messenger - "to get things done for them" - rather it was to make them realise that they had rights which were not dependent on the patronage of any political party; that they should get off their knees and assert their dignity."

There are some of us here today who would not have agreed with Seamus's political ideology, and I believe that that should not be a surprise. We are no different today than the situation that prevailed during his years on the Council, but all had the same ultimate aim as trade unionists - the betterment of workers and their families.

However, we should also bear in mind that many of his republican contemporaries of the late 1970's subsequently chose to pursue a somewhat different political path than that that they were on at that particular time.

Who knows, perhaps Seamus, despite his fierce republican socialist ideals, may very well have chosen the same political approach. Unfortunately, we will never know.

As I said, many of us may have differed with Seamus politically but we should also remember that the history of the international trade union movement is littered with many such situations, where leaders and activists of diverse socialist ideals have differed but they all had one common thread, dare I say it, - actually a common strong fibre - that ensured that so often they actually worked in common council to try to improve the economic and social situation of workers, their families, and the wider community."

The ceremony concluded with a minute's silence for Seamus, other departed members of the Council, and for those involved in the gas explosion tragedy on Friday in Creeslough, Co. Donegal.

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TÁNAISTE REPLIES TO CALL FOR PRICE GOUGING INVESTIGATION

The Council received a reply on behalf of the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Leo Varadkar TD, to the resolution calling for an urgent investigation into widespread reports of price gouging and the exorbitant costs facing both foreign and domestic visitors from the tourism and hospitality sector.

In a letter dated the 21st of September 2022 the Private Secretary to the Minister advised that the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (CCPC) was consulted and provided the following in relation to our resolution.

The CCPC is the statutory body responsible for promoting compliance with, and enforcing, competition and consumer protection in Ireland. The pricing of hotel rooms in Ireland has attracted public attention in the light of the prices presently charged. The hospitality sector is an important sector to the Irish economy. The CCPC seeks to ensure that those participating in this sector remain in compliance with competition and consumer protection law.

In the first instance it is important to note that price gouging is not defined in law, but it is generally understood as a situation where a trader charges prices at a level that is considered unreasonable or unethical. Generally, traders in Ireland are free to set and change their prices for goods and services. Lower prices play a key role in attracting consumers, and traders compete to keep their prices low enough to attract consumers.

In relation to the CCPC's mandate in this area, their role is to ensure that prices are set independently by competing businesses, and those prices are then prominently displayed at the point of sale thereby enabling consumers to make informed choices about which supplier offers the best value. The CCPC do not tell businesses what prices to charge.

When the CCPC receive complaints on pricing, they assess them to see if they indicate a possible breach of any of the areas of competition or consumer protection law that the CCPC is tasked with enforcing. The CCPC also take action on their own initiative when they suspect there may have been a breach. However, they cannot investigate behaviour which a consumer regards as unethical unless the behaviour may breach the law.

The CCPC is tasked with enforcing the Competition Act, 2002 (the "2002 Act") and Articles 101 and 102 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (the "TFEU"). The 2002 Act prohibits and criminalises a number of anti-competitive practices. One such practice is where businesses which are, or should be, in competition with one another agree not to compete or co-ordinate their behaviour so as not to have to compete - commonly known as a cartel.

For example, in response to a complaint received by the CCPC in May of this year, they carried out an assessment of whether an anti-competitive agreement contrary to sections 4 and 6 of the 2002 Act, is occurring or has occurred in respect of the hospitality sector. Section 4 (1) of the 2002 Act sets out a prohibition of anti-competitive agreements, including cartels. Section 6 of the Act criminalises the making of anti-competitive agreements. Following this assessment, the CCPC determined that whilst hotel prices appear to have increased significantly there was insufficient information available to justify opening a full investigation. This was primarily because there was insufficient information available to reasonably suspect that hotels have agreed amongst themselves not to compete or to suspect that they co-ordinated their behaviour so as not to compete with one another; and there are other reasonable explanations justifying the recent increases in the price of hotel rooms.

With regards to other alternative explanations for the recent increase in hotel prices, the CCPC understands that: First, there has been high demand for hotel rooms this year which could not be matched by the hotel rooms available resulting in an upward pressure on hotel room prices. The increased demand appears to be driven by pent up demand from the pandemic seasons, increased household savings and deferred bookings washing through the system. Dublin in particular has had a very high occupancy rate this year ranking consistently amongst the highest in Europe. Furthermore, an increase in the number of events such as weddings has put further pressure on demand for hotel rooms.

On the supply side, with the Government having contracted with hoteliers to house Ukrainian refugees, the CCPC have advised that they understand that a larger number of hotel rooms than usual has been taken out of circulation and, accordingly, are not available to tourists or business customers. In addition, the resurgence in demand has come at an earlier stage than generally anticipated by the industry, resulting in low staffing levels leaving some rooms unavailable.

The CCPC advised that as a consequence, the industry has experienced an unprecedented upward pressure on hotel room prices. With high demand and low supply, as with any good or service, there is a general incentive to increase prices, without having to collude to do so. Furthermore, some hotels and hotel groups may engage in yield management, meaning that rooms are priced so that, at a particular occupancy rate, the prices for the remaining hotel rooms increases.

The CCPC will monitor developments in the industry and will continue to operate its whistleblowing programme to keep open the possibility of enforcement action in the hotels sector. Any person that has information about potential breaches of competition or consumer protection laws should contact the CCPC.

WHEN FOOTBALL HISTORY REPEATS AS TRAGEDY

Will football never learn? For many, many thousands of us, the harrowing flashbacks to witnessing mass deaths at Heysel and Hillsborough need no more reminders that the stadiums are potential deathtraps.

The nightmare recurs again and again. In Paris this spring, Liverpool supporters were pepper sprayed outside the gates of the Stade de France simply for following their team to the Champions League final. The politicians, police and UEFA attempted, without a shred of credibility, to blame the fans simply for being there. Those fans, young and old, were victims of chaotic, ill-disciplined, weaponised policing. Paris will host the 2024 Summer Olympics.

Last Saturday [8th October 2022], at least 125 fans died and many others suffered life-changing injuries after a stampede that occurred when Indonesian police teargassed fans who had run on to the pitch after Arema FC lost 3-2 at home to their rivals Persebaya Surabaya.

From Zurich, FIFA president Gianni Infantino issued the somber message that this was a "dark day for all involved in football...a tragedy beyond comprehension."

Yet football's tragedies are not remotely incomprehensible. They recur with dreadful regularity, and the authorities (both sporting and policing) should not be allowed to wash their hands of responsibility.

Indonesia is the next stop on FIFA's money-spinning schedule after this winter's World Cup in Qatar. Next May and June, six stadiums in the country are set to host the 24-nation FIFA Under-20 World Cup. England, France, Italy, Israel, Slovakia, and the United States of America are among the nations qualified for that tournament, which had to be postponed in 2021 because of the Covid pandemic.

The death certificates about to be written in Indonesia will doubtless be familiar to what we, in football, are grimly accustomed to. We are scarred, still, by the inquests into Hillsborough, and the Ibrox stadium disaster, now over 50 years ago, and those awful words "compressive asphyxia". It means people, from infants to the elderly, having the oxygen suffocated out of them in the panic to get away from overcrowded situations.

We already know that the youngest victim in the stadium last Sunday was five years of age. And we hear as well as read the early shots in the blame game. The East Java police chief broadcast on Sunday: "It got anarchic. They (the fans) started attacking officers, they damaged cars."

Two officers, he said, were among the dead. That police chief, Nico Afinto, added: "We would like to convey that not all of them (the Arema fans) were anarchic, only about 3,000 who entered the pitch."

Mobile phone footage captured the all-too-familiar scenes. The rush of angry fans on to the pitch, the police opening fire with teargas and truncheons, the terror as fans scrambled over fences and were sucked towards the exit gate. Some were trampled in the rush, the breath forced out of them where they lay.

And in this day and age, citizen journalists armed with mobile phones provide graphic eyewitness accounts from within the catastrophe. Muhamad Dipo Maulana, 21, told BBC Indonesia that when the game ended "a few" Arema FC fans were angry at their team for losing the match. "They went on to the pitch to remonstrate with the players," he said. "They were intercepted by police and beaten".

He described the build-up of police with dogs and shields, and then the arrival of soldiers. Then the teargas, more than 20 rounds of it, "like bang, bang, bang, continuous and fast, directed to all the stands."

Maulanna saw people panicking and trampling one another as they tried to get out of the stadium. The police also talked of far too many people attempting to flee through one or two narrow exits and being crushed by the weight of their numbers at those gates.

All too graphic, too horribly unforgettably reminiscent of Leppings Lane in Hillsborough where thousands too many Liverpool supporters had been herded into one steel-fenced stand behind a goal. And their panic, their attempt to escape asphyxia through chronic overcrowding due to police error.

Attempting to scramble up the fencing that authorities erected to prevent pitch encroachment during the hooligan era. Innocent spectators sucked towards the one woefully insufficient narrow gate between that pen and the playing field.

Those of us who were metres away became enforced onlookers to death through negligence. And

some of us saw it at close quarters in the Heysel stadium in Brussels where, again, we had no way to intervene to save lives. Once more, we were grim witnesses to bodies piled up in impromptu morgues outside the "sporting" arena.

Never again, we prayed. Never again, promised football, police, governors, and particularly the people - mostly men - who mouth condolences and promise to do all they can. Then they move swiftly on to the next big tournament, next big pay day.

The Hillsborough Survivors Support Alliance on Merseyside repeated their now familiar refrain last Sunday. "No one should go to a match and not go home."

(Rob Hughes, TNE - Oct 2022)

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