

Fórsa leader seeks to renew union consolidation plan

ANDY PRENDERGAST

General secretary of the Fórsa trade union, Kevin Callinan, has said he wants to make a “fresh attempt” to merge trade unions, along sectoral lines, stemming from plans outlined in the commission on trade unions, ten years ago.

Since the 2011 commission on the trade union movement outlined weaknesses in having scores of trade unions, there has been just two major trade union mergers: IMPACT, PSEU and CPSU merged to become Fórsa, while TEEU and UCATT merged to become Connect.

Mr Callinan, speaking at the Fórsa Health divisional conference, this week, says that, ten years on from the commission, he now wants trade unions “to get serious about its recommendations.”

“At the core of the report was the view that we should move to a much smaller number of sectoral unions and that we should pool resources as far as possible. I want to initiate a fresh attempt to put these exhortations into practice. We know that avoiding them is not making us any stronger.”

Mr Callinan suggested the trade union movement has not done enough to appeal to workers in new or growing industries: “If we are honest we should admit that a whole section of the workforce – that associated with 'Big Tech', ICT and Digital, FinTech and Accounting, and much of Financial Services, Pharma, Biomedical Services and the gig economy has been out of reach for – and to an extent ignored by – the trade union movement.”

“I would like to lead an attempt to make us relevant to these workers and to make them part of our movement. Our ability to speak with maximum credibility for workers and to influence the future to best effect will depend on whether we are successful.”

Mr Callinan will contest the presidency of ICTU, later this year.

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING RESEARCH

Next week, Fórsa will release findings on legal research it has commissioned, for use in the ongoing High-Level review of collective bargaining and industrial relations in Ireland (Mr Callinan is one of three ICTU representatives in the review group).

Touching on the subject at the Fórsa conference, Mr Callinan said Ireland is an outlier in Europe when it comes to collective bargaining. He said “it is vital that there is an openness

to all possible solutions – statutory, constitutional and European – if we are to realise not just the right to organise, but the right to be heard and the right to bargain collectively.”

“Although these are matters of fairness and justice we will need to simplify our messaging and language to win the support of ordinary citizens”, he said.

The Fórsa research, entitled ‘Collective Benefit – Harnessing the power of representation for economic and social progress’, will be published next Monday, May 31.

Mr Callinan says that long-held positions are shifting on both sides of the Atlantic.

He commented that ‘Union guy’ Joe Biden’s administration “is starting the process of beefing-up collective bargaining rights, and EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen recently promoted the idea in her State of the European Union address.”

The proposed EU Directive on the Minimum Wage would require Ireland and other EU member states to take action to increase to 70% the number of workers who benefit from collective bargaining.

The union leader said that coverage in Ireland “is currently around 33.5%, placing us second-lowest among the 14 countries in EU membership since before 2004.”