

Trade union rationalisation back in focus, 'new economy' targeted

ANDY PRENDERGAST

A renewed effort to combine the resources of trade unions in Ireland was a key issue to emerge from the 2021 ICTU biennial delegate conference, resurrecting the long-running but difficult goal of restructuring and future mergers. Congress is also taking steps to get a foothold in the 'new economy', such as tech, which hitherto have had no union presence.

Ten years on from the Commission on the Future of Trade Unions, established with the objective of "optimising effectiveness through co-ordination of resources" of trade unions, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions is now re-evaluating this initiative, which could go some way to addressing the issues associated with having a multiplicity of unions – sometimes competing with each other – in the same sectors.

Under the theme of 'Building a Stronger Trade Union Movement in Ireland', Congress recognises that the trade union movement on the island of Ireland "faces significant organisational deficits which pose an existential crisis for the movement if not comprehensively addressed" and acknowledges that "while many unions report stable or growing memberships, overall trade union density in Ireland has failed to keep pace with employment growth and as such continues to fall."

Pooling resources lays groundwork for shoring-up trade union power into the future

At present there are 45 trade unions affiliated (and six trade unions associated) to ICTU. While plans to "simplify" this structure have long been discussed – and a 2013 Congress conference motion had backed a move to a more federal structure – there have been just two significant union mergers in recent years: Fórsa was created in 2017, merging IMPACT, PSEU and the CPSU, while Connect emerged shortly afterwards, merging the TEEU and UCATT.

Trade union mergers can be very difficult to achieve, as demonstrated in other states such as the Netherlands, and there is no automatic mechanism to amalgamate unions in Ireland. But the reasons for changing the structure of the trade union movement in Ireland remain compelling to some – namely to gain more influence and impact in certain sectors of the economy.

The idea of having one union for one sector would also address the issue of several unions competing with each other – and which can lead to fraught relations, as demonstrated recently in the row between the ASTI and the TUI over membership (*see [IRN 38/2021](#)*).

Therefore, the capacity to cooperate on initiatives and pool resources is seen as laying the groundwork for shoring-up trade union power into the future.

EU DIRECTIVE

In the background to this is the ongoing work of the High-Level Group on collective bargaining and industrial relations, set up under the social partner LEEF body, as well as the EU Directive on adequate minimum wages, which will change the face of collective bargaining in Ireland – at least to some degree.

Hypothetically, if the Directive was to enhance enforcement of collective bargaining in some sectors, inter-union difficulties would want to be avoided.

Congress has now agreed to complete a 10-year progress review of the 2011 recommendations of the Commission of the Irish Trade Union Movement (by April 2022) and produce a refreshed strategy for the movement with clear actionable recommendations that covers: current and future challenges and opportunities; structures, capacity and resources to deliver on this strategy; opportunities for greater trade union cooperation and collaboration across the island.

It will also establish “a number of high-level strategic groups under the leadership, oversight and direction of the ICTU Executive Council”, to progress the following actions during its term of office:

- Develop a single, unified trade union public communications campaign to explain the concept of collective bargaining in accessible terms, and why it is of importance and value, both for workers and society;
- Develop a collaborative cross-union campaign and organising strategy, involving relevant affiliate unions, to build trade union profile, presence and power in strategically significant emerging growth sectors of the Irish economy, such as tech, digital and the gig economy. This should be delivered through shared union resources and co-financing, and guided by quality research.

ICTU is also exploring the idea of a new, trade union funded, digital-first media platform, informed by national and international research.

Further to this, it also wants to see greater pooling and better coordination of union resources on the island, including a new 32-county education and outreach programme for schools and colleges.

Fórsa general secretary and new ICTU president, Kevin Callinan, also outlined how he wants to produce a strategic plan for ICTU, informed by the 10-year review “and an honest assessment of our opportunities and challenges, and establish a cross-union strategic change project team to drive forward its recommendations over the next two years.”

INTERNATIONAL LESSONS

Trade union rationalisation in other territories offer insights into the potential and complexity of union amalgamation.

The former ICTU general secretary David Begg was an advocate of the Dutch model, which now has one large trade union confederation, the FNV, and a few smaller trade union groupings along sectoral lines.

However, the Dutch trade union rationalisation plan had to be adapted along the way to resolve internal difficulties that emerged when the project first began.

The Netherlands have a lower trade union density rate than Ireland but a much higher collective bargaining coverage rate.

In Austria, trade union density is slightly lower than in Ireland but it has an overwhelming 98% collective bargaining coverage. There are now seven trade unions in Austria, which are members of the Austrian trade union confederation, following a number of trade union mergers in the last two decades.

While there are stronger compelling mechanisms for collective bargaining in these Member States than in Ireland, the voluntarist approach to IR in Ireland is expected to be altered in years to come, depending on how the forthcoming EU Directive pans out.

The Directive may not address union density levels; rather, the focus is on collective bargaining coverage.

But trade union density numbers is not the primary focus for trade unions, on a general level, something alluded to by ICTU general secretary Patricia King this week, when she said, "the measure of our strength is not just in our density but very much in our levels of impact and influence."

THE NEW ECONOMY

Also on the agenda for ICTU unions is their campaign to organise in the "new economy", such as tech and digital services and the gig economy.

ICTU has agreed to conduct research on the emerging organising movements and dynamic unionisation drives taking place in the 'big tech' sector in the United States, to inform its approach to organising in the tech sector "and in other hostile, non-traditional sectors for the union movement across the island of Ireland."

It is to develop an organising strategy and public communications campaign "to establish an active trade union presence and voice in emerging growth sectors of the Irish economy, which are predominated by multinational anti-union companies, in particular tech, ICT, FinTech and accounting, financial services, digital communications, and the gig economy."

In addition, Congress wants to “intervene in public debate on working conditions in these sectors of the economy, and for strategic partnerships which strengthen the position of the Irish trade union movement to grow our influence with these workers.”

A cross-union organising committee, chaired by the ICTU President, is to commence strategic organising activity in the tech sector, and a cross-union campaign fund for advocacy, strategic litigation, digital technology and communications expertise is to be established.

As part of this campaign, Congress wants to develop and communicate “a new vision for Ireland’s enterprise strategy and international business competitiveness, to challenge the current over-reliance on the FDI/inward investment model, and emphasise a world class work-life balance, high quality of life, and strong workplace democracy.”

A special session on organising in the new economy was convened at the ICTU conference this week, chaired by Kevin Callinan, Fórsa, and featured speakers: Fionnuala Ní Bhrógáin, CWU; Gareth Murphy, FSU; Martha Dark, Foxglove; and Wes McEnany, CODE-CWA.