

Union renewal needed to make use of collective bargaining reforms

COLMAN HIGGINS

Collective bargaining reform was seen at this week's Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) biennial conference as an opportunity for membership growth, with the union umbrella body devising common strategies, against a backdrop of static member figures in the Republic since 2019.

In debates on collective bargaining and union organising at this week's ICTU biennial conference, a certain excitement at what the recommendations of the High Level Group on Collective Bargaining and the EU's Minimum Wages Directive may bring was tinged with concern that the implementation of these potentially far-reaching changes may fall short of the reforms that unions have been hoping for.

This discussion takes place against a background of largely static membership of ICTU unions in the Republic of Ireland over the period since 2019.

Financial sanctions sought for poaching members

Membership south of the Border as of December 31, 2022, stood at 517,307 – just 523 less than the same date in 2019. It increased to 522,372 in 2020 and declined to 515,757 in 2021, before rising again during 2022.

The union body's combined membership in the Republic is now 51.54% public sector, up almost a percentage point on December 31, 2021.

Almost two-thirds (65.9%) of the female members are now in the public sector, with female membership in the Republic up 1.88% since the end of 2019. However, women as a percentage of members in the private sector is in about half this, at 34.1%.

Total ICTU membership across the island of Ireland is now 716,970, a 0.44% change since 2019, due to a 1.84% increase in Northern Ireland membership. The public sector accounts for a higher proportion of members in Northern Ireland, at about 67.7%.

UNION MERGERS

A report to this week's ICTU conference on 'Building membership and organizing capacity' referred to a review by the Congress General Purposes Committee (GPC) of the recommendations of the Commission on Trade Unions in 2011, which had set out a bold

plan for consolidation into less than ten major sector-based unions. *(for more detail on this plan, see [IRN 24/2013](#))*

This week's report said that since then, the level of progress has in the main been "disappointing", adding that since a small number of mergers towards the end of the 2010s, most noticeably the one that created Fórsa, there "has been little development in terms of trade union consolidation" – with density falling even further due to employment growth.

While a number of sectoral union groups had been created at national level, these "did not regard themselves as being empowered to adopt coordinated, strategic organising across a sector unless explicitly requested by affiliate unions to do so".

But while there was low cooperation between unions, "possibly due to a trust deficit", there was an openness to shared organising initiatives under Congress auspices.

The group concluded that while the High Level Group and EU Directive offered opportunities, organising strategies have to be adequate.

MEMBER POACHING

Among its conclusions were that "competitive trade unionism must end", with mechanisms developed to build inter-union trust.

In this vein, a motion passed at this week's conference, on 'poaching of union members' provides for a review of the guidelines on member transfers put in place back in 2001.

These guidelines already impose significant restrictions on groups of members seeking to transfer from one ICTU union to another, including keeping the union potentially losing members informed throughout the process.

The motion passed this week – proposed by the Connect trade union – calls for the review to examine "further sanctions, including financial sanctions", where an affiliate union is found to have poached members.

UNEXPECTED RESULT

In terms of collaboration within Congress, a survey of public awareness of collective bargaining was commissioned by Fórsa, FSU and CWU (for more detail on this, see [IRN 14/2023](#)). This showed an unexpected level of positivity, prompting the GPC to focus on a separate public relations campaign encouraging union membership.

This PR campaign is expected to get under way later this year, alongside an independent digital journalism unit under the auspices of Congress (for more, see other ICTU Conference item in this section).

ICTU is also looking at sharing resources between unions in areas such as staff training, communications, ICT networks/membership databases, meeting facilities, member benefit schemes and staff pension costs.

In terms of local bodies, a review undertaken for Congress aimed to expand the ONE Cork/Galway model to other areas, identify new areas for district trades councils and expand the Local Trade Union Centres.

'MINDSET CHANGE'

ICTU general secretary Owen Reidy told delegates that the EU Adequate Minimum Wages Directive was "the most radical and progressive directive to come out of Europe in 20 years", in that it obliges governments to promote collective bargaining.

But he said the unions need to ensure that it is implemented "government-wide" and there is a "mindset-change" when it comes to collective bargaining, which they can no longer be neutral about.

"There are people in our administration today who don't want to do this. And there are people in the permanent administration today who don't want to do this. We have to face them down," he said.

It is also up to the unions, he said, to recruit new members. "We still represent the minority – the few rather than the many" but "we have to be centre stage".

'EATEN BREAD SOON FORGOTTEN'

SIPTU deputy general secretary Ethel Buckley said that in order "to build worker power, first we must organise, then we bargain". Bargaining first and then asking workers to join is "doomed to fail", as "eaten bread is soon forgotten".

She added that while the High Level Group and EU Directive could be a major opportunity for unions, it was also possible that they may not be. "Collective bargaining does not equate to trade union membership", she said.

She believed that some employers saw collective bargaining as happening without union members. But if the Directive was to happen without union membership, then that's "a fast train to irrelevance across a whole swathe of the economy, particularly in the private sector".

Unite regional coordinating officer Tom Fitzgerald told delegates that in relation to the 'good faith' bargaining provisions in the High Level Group report, he was concerned that employers would try to elongate the process as much as possible, to dissipate any mood among union members for industrial action.

'PRETEND' UNIONS

The general secretary of the European Trade Union Congress (ETUC), Esther Lynch – herself a former ICTU official – said that “even in the new Directive, only trade unions sign collective agreements”. She said the unions throughout Europe were facing “attempts by others to be able to pretend to be trade unions”.

CWU National Officer, Fionnuala Ní Bhrógáin, referred to “ubiquitous union-avoiding staff forums”, but said that if the Irish Government “is prevailed upon to transpose the Directive into meaningful worker-led legislation, then it could immeasurably improve the environment for union organising”.

Former ICTU general secretary, Patricia King, in her address to the conference, pointed out that unions need to organise sectors like windfarms if they wanted to maintain their current industrial strength in the energy sector into the future.