



EQUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE



Address on behalf of Congress Disability Committees
BDC July 2013
Deirdre O'Connor, Chair of Congress Disability Committee

Colleagues, I appreciate this opportunity to address the Conference on behalf of the Congress Disability Committees. The two Committees, North and South meet on a regular basis, to consider the issues for our members with disabilities, and how to overcome the barriers which prevent people with disabilities from participating in the workplace and in our unions.

A recent report prepared by the ESRI for the Equality Authority noted that the period from 2004 to 2010 saw an intense focus on disability policy issues. Their analysis indicates that this did not translate into improvements in the area of employment. People with a disability have a considerably lower labour market participation rate (36 per cent in 2010) and a considerably higher unemployment rate (22 per cent in 2010) than those without a disability. It is also a concern that the employment rate of people with a disability in Ireland is lower than is typical in European countries.

Those who are in employment are more likely to experience discrimination in the workplace than those

without disabilities. A report from the National Disability Authority in 2011 reported an alarming hardening in attitudes to disability, including a decrease in people's level of comfort in working with a person with a disability, with particular difficulty in the area of mental health.

The Disability Committees work focuses on how these difficulties can be overcome. At our annual disability seminars, we bring together members with and without disabilities, experts and activists in the area of disability and employment, and trade union leaders. The seminars raise awareness of disability issues, as well as giving an opportunity for unions to share good practice. The 2012 seminar looked at the impact of the economic crisis on people with disabilities. We were delighted to be joined by disability rights campaigners who shared their experience of the cuts to services such as personal assistance and mobility allowances. These services are critical to enabling some people with disabilities to access and remain in employment. There was broad agreement at the seminar that unions and people with disabilities and their representative organizations need to ensure that these services, which are delivered by union members are well resourced and of a high quality.

At the seminar, concerns were also expressed about the impact of welfare reform in Northern Ireland on people with disabilities, including the replacement of Disability Living Allowance with Personal Independence payments, and the introduction of Work Capability assessments, with concerns being expressed that these reforms are not about a better fairer system, but simply a means to reduce payments.

The Committee in the Republic continues to monitor the reporting of the 3% target for the employment of people with disabilities in the public service. For the first time, the 3% target was met in 2011, and we welcomed this. The

NDA has worked hard to ensure that the reporting is carried out accurately and sensitively in the various services. We are concerned at the failure of some state bodies, notably the HSE, to adequately provide data in this regard. We are also concerned that the moratorium on recruitment generally has impacted on the employment of people with disabilities. It is important that public bodies plan now for meeting this target in the future.

The Committees are committed to ensuring that people with disabilities are recognized and represented in their unions. In October 2011, we launched a revised Code of Practice for Trade unions on disability issues. The amendments to the Code focused on the area of mental health difficulties, which many unions have prioritized over the past 2 years.

During this period, we have also worked to ensure that the benefits of the Disability Champions programme continue to be felt in unions. While the funding for the programme finished in 2011, the training has continued in individual unions, through the Trade Union Skillnet and through the Petal training in Northern Ireland. We are also delighted that the training will be incorporated into a Trade Union Studies Award.

Finally, the Committees contributed to a submission to the Commission on Trade Unions, highlighting the need to consider the representation of people with disabilities and other under represented groups in any restructuring of Congress and unions. Surely one of the keys to ensuring the success of unions in the future is to ensure that the voices of these groups are heard at the highest level in our organizations, and that at grassroots level, unions are seen to be inclusive of all.