

“From *Populorum Progressio* to *Laudato Si’* ”

International Trade Unions Meeting

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ADDRESS BY GENERAL SECRETARY OF CONGRESS

Inequality has been at the heart of much of the upheaval faced by the world in the last number of years.

Income inequality, gender inequality and inequality of opportunity are evident in almost every country in the world.

As many contributors have already stated, we have already entered the 4th industrial revolution, the age of digitisation, which will see the pace of change unprecedented in human history.

Yet, in parallel with this, mass migrations of biblical proportions of people fleeing oppression, persecution and war continue. Simultaneously, the consequences of 300 years of unsustainable exploitation has come home to roost, in the form of environmental degradation and climate change, threatening the future of the human species and the very eco system itself.

The words of His Holiness Pope Francis, in *Laudato Si* underlines the fact that, unless climate action is taken, our objectives of social progress and decent work for all will remain a dream.

Human rights and social justice are continuously threatened by the degradation of our environment. His powerful message reinforces the need for a ‘Just Transition’ to a low carbon environmentally sustainable future.

But, he also emphasis what we in the trade union movement already know: that in the absence of pressure from citizens, political authorities will always be reluctant to intervene.

It is worth noting that, in the run up to the *Paris 2015 Agreement*, environmental groups, social movements, trade unions, and faith groups joined in the fight for climate change supporting a commitment of a ‘Just Transition’ of our economies and societies for the sake of our planet and the people who inhabit it. Finding the means to a ‘Just Transition’ is a moral, economic and political imperative. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions has consistently advocated that in order for workers to maintain decent work, and a ‘Just Transition’ to become a reality, Governments must make the necessary investments.

Delegates, Ireland is one of the richest countries in the world, yet, the OECD and Eurostat data confirms that we have:

- One of the highest levels of low pay.
- Women, young people and migrant workers are most at risk of being low paid.
- 1 in 5 workers are on 'other or no' contracts.
- Trade union recognition does not apply in the Republic of Ireland.
- Free collective bargaining is not mandatory.

A society with a *precarariat* is not just an economic problem, it is also socially unsustainable. It plays into an increasingly dysfunctional framework delaying relationships and family formation and the prospect of full and decent lives. It also has implications in terms of health and mental health, work life balance, housing etc¹.

Across the world we have a growing and overwhelming imbalance between capital and labour. Labour is treated as a commodity. The counter balance to the 'march of capitalism' and globalisation is free collective bargaining. Every worker should have to be afforded this right. Workers should be in a position to bargain the value of their labour.

While we should embrace digital advancement, we should do so on the basis of collectively bargained terms. We should not be seduced by narratives claiming to improve the lot of workers, unless they are based on 'hard law' fundamentals and I include the European Pillar of Social Rights in this as, so far, it seems to be a 'soft law' option. I can tell you that in Ireland we are well aware of the EU ability to implement 'hard law' as they did by imposing austerity measures in order to bail out bankers.

One of the biggest fears capitalists have always had is that the trade union movement will ever occupy a space where they can ensure that workers achieve their fair share. They have expended large resources to ensure this never happens. Our ongoing relentless mission must be to ensure that they don't succeed.

That is the same mission of 100 years ago. The key to delivering our mission is our unique solidarity which we must never allow them to break.

Our task as leaders of this great movement is to nourish, encourage and develop that solidarity and by so doing weaken the chances of the other side succeeding.

Poverty is a scandal. As long as we treat corporatism as people and poor people as things/commodities, we will continue the trajectory of poverty denial.

¹ These remarks echo comments made by SIPTU's Jack O'Connor at a recent Social Justice Policy Conference.