

ICTU Energy & Natural Resources Conference, May 10

I think, if we are to be honest, like many others we have been late in the day in seriously engaging with climate change in the Trade Union Movement. The ITUC Paper, 'There are no jobs on a dead planet' published in 2015, I think was a game-changer, however, and has focussed minds on the need to rapidly change to a carbon-free economy. Time, as we all know, is running out. It is easy to feel morally superior to the climate change deniers, from the likes of Trump or Michael O'Leary but, unless we actually try to tackle it, are we really any better? And while the necessity to reduce carbon emissions can be tackled in the abstract, because the vast majority of people actually get it; when it comes to making hard and difficult decisions, the consequences of responding to it in our own back yard, mura dhea, well then that's when 'things begin to fall apart'.

I for my sins am a bog-man. I was born a few miles from the bog of Allen. I worked from a young age with Bord na Mona, I became secretary of the Bord na Mona Group of Unions in the late 90s for a 5-year stint and for the last 3 years I find myself again with the Energy brief in SIPTU with responsibility for Bord na Mona, amongst the other major energy companies, such as the ESB and Bord Gais who are also highly dependent on fossils fuel in one way or another. So, whatever about taking the bog out of the man, I seem to have very seldom even managed to take myself out of the bog.

And where there be bogs, there be poverty. The great success of Bord na Mona was that it de-bunked this great truism. Bord na Mona gave hope to the many impoverished small towns and villages throughout the midlands. The creation of the ESB and Bord na Mona gave practical effect to a real sense of 'Sinn Feinism', a 'yes We Can', an 'ourselves alone' in the spirit of the Irish Revolution. These semi-state companies improved living standards for many thousands of workers and brought a sense of self-confidence to many communities. I think the success of Offaly football and hurling throughout the 1970s and up to the 90s was inextricably linked to the relative prosperity that Bord na Mona and the ESB brought to the communities in villages and towns such as Ferbane, Rhode, Shannonbridge, Birr and Portarlinton and many more besides. Bord na Mona is now in decline in its core business as the bogs are being mined-out and no new ones are being harvested. And as the sporting feats of the great Offaly hurlers of the past: The Dooley's, Whelehans', Pilkingtons' begin to fade with no new heroes on the horizon, the future for the small towns and villages of Offaly and indeed throughout the midlands is uncertain. In some respects, Ireland's small towns are beginning to resemble the North of England's bleak post-industrial wastelands. The more reliant towns were on manufacturing/mining the bleaker they have become.

We now stand at an historical turning point; de-industrialisation has condemned whole communities to a post-industrial malaise. There is a palpable sense of hopelessness and powerlessness in post-industrial communities. The Brexit vote gave the people from the

bleak, post-industrial landscapes of a forgotten Britain an opportunity to express their anger at their plight.

I want to read an extract from an article by Jeremy Seabrook written in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum which captures this sentiment:

A more authentic popular response exists beneath the official record. A persistent murmur of discontent and powerlessness. Anger and aggression swirl around like dust and waste paper in the streets of our affluent, unequal society.....Rancour appears among those left behind, people who never voted for unchosen change, as all political options are locked up in a country of elites, 'Give us Back our Country' they cry; even though the country is not in the custody of those from whom they would reclaim it.

There was no space for the working class to grieve over its own dissolution.....Grief denied in individuals leads to damaged psychological disorders. There is no reason to believe that this differs for those bereaved of a known way of living. The working class has been colonised, as was the peasantry in the early industrial era. When the values, beliefs and myths of indigenous peoples are laid waste, these lose meaning, and people go to grieve in city slums and die from alcohol, drugs and other forms of self-inflicted violence. Though the dominant culture's erasure of the manufacturing way of life in Britain was less intense than the colonial ruin of ancient societies, this subculture was equally unceremoniously broken. It is a question of degree. The ravages of drugs and alcohol and self-harm in silent former pit villages and derelict factory towns show convergence with other ruined cultures elsewhere in the world."

The transition to a low-carbon economy has the potential to accelerate the rate of de-industrialisation. And if we don't find a way to bring about a 'Just transition' we will be complicit in replicating the post-industrial apocalypse that has been the fate of communities in so called *rust-belts* all-across the world. There are not many shining examples of cities or towns who have managed to re-invent themselves who had previously been singularly dependent on heavy industry and mining. What comes post industrialisation is typically poorly-paid precarious service-industry jobs. (There is a sense of a return to a pre-industrial age about the modern service economy, as many of the roles and duties of domestic labour of earlier centuries have essentially been compartmentalised and outsourced; such as child-minding, cleaning, catering, elderly care, security, gardening, personal grooming.) De-industrialisation has been paralleled by a similar decline in trade union density. But whereas, the factory, as the locus of production, determined to a large extent the economic and social relations of the 19th and 20th centuries, the economic fulcrum now is less discernible. The Information age does not easily lend itself to such grand narratives concerning the key determinant factor of economic and societal relations. But this much is clear; is that we if we don't make intelligent interventions in the market, then the natural tendency for market forces to concentrate wealth in ever decreasing hands will continue unabated and the relative wealth that the semi-state sector provided in the past will not be a legacy that the

next generation of workers will inherit. The ability of a pre-distribution of wealth at the point of production, through the efforts of organised labour, is radically reduced in the post-industrial age and the state is left as the primary agent for the redistribution of wealth through progressive tax regimes and welfare schemes.

So, what is to be done? How can we use this existential crisis which is climate change to re-imagine and ultimately transform our world and sustain and maintain our towns and villages across the Island?

Our job in the trade union movement is, as ever, to extend popular sovereignty over the economy and deliver decent terms and conditions for workers. It strikes me that the semi-state model has historically been a very dynamic creation of our state that tried to marry the competing needs of the economy and society. Regrettably in recent times a blind faith in market forces has tried to paint the semi-state sector as passé. Increasingly the make-up of boards of semi-state companies has been narrowed to an accountant class as they busily attempt to impose purely market-based decisions which has huge implications on our member's ability to earn decent wages and this further erodes the quality of life for our members and more importantly the communities of which they are part of.

We believe, that just as the semi-state sector was the key to the initial industrialisation of Ireland, its role in bringing about a just transition to a low carbon economy can be equally as dynamic. Unless we plan our way to a low-carbon future it will not happen. The recent announcement by both Bord na Mona and the ESB in respect of the large-scale solar parks is a good example of this type of planning. The announcement to close-down Littleton Briquette factory is the exact opposite of a just transition, however. There was no involvement of the trade union movement in the decision, there was no involvement by the department, as far as I know. There is no realistic time-scale for to allow time to plan for alternative jobs, either within or outside of Bord na Mona, no time to allow for re-training, re-education, re-skilling. That factory is the life blood for Littleton, Killenaule and Templetouhy. It is not acceptable that Government simply stand aside, and portray this as some sort of act of neutrality as was the case in Bus Eirean. It is no such thing; it is a deeply political and ideologically driven act because what is says is; the market is king and we shall not interfere with the divine rights of the market. I would ask the Minister to give consideration to requesting the Board of Bord na Mona to reflect on its decision, to defer the closure for a reasonable length of time, 3 years for example. (The English mis-adventure, Queen Victoria) This would allow time to give practical effect to the theme of this conference, namely time to plan for a just transition for the very proud and dignified workers of Littleton Briquette factory.

Now the ICTU Energy Committee has a number of key demands:

- The establishment of a tripartite body: comprising of trade unions, employers and government to ensure there is just transition to a low carbon economy

- The establishment of a just transition fund, both at European and national level, to assist communities and workers in the transition to a low carbon economy
- A study of the impact of meeting our goals under the Paris agreement will have on fossil fuel dependent communities in Ireland
- Legislation ensuring that 'just transition' principles are enshrined in Irish law

The trade union movement can no longer fight to retain every job in existing carbon-producing industry and by so doing absolve ourselves of being complicit in the Planet's destruction. The European Trade Union Congress (ETUC) has been working on the establishment of a 'Just Transition Fund'. The purpose of this fund, in short, is to give financial support to those workers who will be negatively impacted by the structural changes in the labour market because of the decarbonisation of the economy. The fund could be used for business creation, education, training, redeployment, social protection measures for workers so effected. It could be used to help re-generation in parts of the midlands which were heavily dependent on peat excavation. But this will take some time to put in place and I don't think we have that kind of time. We could use the PSO associated with peat as a source of income for the beginning of a national just transition fund.

But this only gets us so far, however. The unfortunate reality is that the type of jobs that have been created to date in the Irish economy in renewable energies have tended to be contract, non-unionised jobs, and not of a similar calibre to the jobs they are notionally replacing. If we don't try to shape the de-carbonised energy market it could see the end of decent well-paid jobs in the Energy Sector. Now of course that are many new jobs that can be created in the green economy but my fear is that the people we represent will be left behind in similar ways to which working-class people were left behind in the rust-belt communities of Britain and America that I referred to earlier.

That is why we need *buy-in* from all the social partners for the compelling need for a just transition to a low carbon economy if we are to use this existential threat to the planet as the opportunity to build a new world out of the embers of our industrial past.

