

Opening Address to Congress Disability Seminar

November 17/18 2016

Achieving Decent Work for People with Disabilities

Brian Campfield, President, Irish Congress of Trade Unions.

On behalf of Congress I am delighted to welcome all of you from North and South to the annual Congress Disability Seminar.

It is through the work of people like yourselves and events such as this that we are reminded that as a trade union movement, we must continue to strive towards being an inclusive movement, one which values the voices of all of our members, including people with disabilities. This is why this event is such an important one in the trade union calendar and I am delighted to be here.

I also wish to welcome and thank all of the guest speakers and congratulate the Disability Committee for putting together a timely and stimulating agenda.

The theme is an important and topical one.

As we embark on the seminar it is no harm to remind ourselves what we mean by decent work, which sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives.

Decent Work means work that is productive and delivers a fair income. It means security in the workplace and social protection for families. Decent work means better prospects for personal development and social integration as well as freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives.

It also means equality of opportunity and treatment for all workers regardless of gender, age, sexual orientation, religious or political belief, race or disability.

Importantly, decent work is now also part of Agenda 2030 – the global development agenda for the next 14 years.

According to the latest estimates, there are approximately one billion people with disabilities worldwide. With nearly a million disabled people of working age. However, across the world, people with disabilities still face severe discrimination, especially when it comes to accessing equal job opportunities.

Efforts to promote Disability Inclusion throughout Ireland, North and South and the World have of course been given focus by the adoption of The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Whilst the articles contained within the Convention are binding on governments which have ratified, we continue to see policies – such as those brought in under the UK Government's

reform of the Social Security System in the UK – which appear to be in direct contravention of the UNCRPD. This is why it is especially important that trade unions continue to be vigilant in monitoring and equality impact assessing government policies. We will also be working in the Republic to ensure that the Government uphold their commitment to ratify the convention by the end of 2016.

I know that you will be hearing more about the important provisions contained within the UNCRPD during the course of the seminar.

I want to acknowledge the important contribution that the Disability Committees – under the leadership of Marcel Dummigan (NIPSA) and Clare Mahon (INMO) - make North and South in terms of informing the Congress position in relation to these important issues.

In the context of deep austerity, cuts to public funding and the rise in precarious work, the role of the Disability Champion is more important than ever.

As an advocate, the Disability Champion can support and advise disabled workers and can also work alongside the employer. Congress continues to offer training for Disability Champions and also works with the Equality Commission in Northern Ireland to provide sessions on recent legislative changes and developments in Disability Law. Seeking to revitalise the disability champions training in the Republic is on the agenda of the Workers College.

The Committees North and South have worked tirelessly towards the publication of employment strategies for people with disabilities. In the Republic, we very much welcomed the publication of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities and we sit on the implementation group hosted by the Department of Justice.

In Northern Ireland, the publication of the NI Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities was also welcomed. I know that you will be hearing more about both of these strategies later in the programme and I very much look forward to feedback on these sessions.

The need for these strategies remains all too clear to us in this room.

People with a disability are substantially less likely to be active in the labour market and are more likely to experience discrimination.

Our work continues to take place in the context of austerity, pressure on public services and an uncertain economic and political climate both locally and internationally.

Such a context means that finding decent work remains a huge challenge if you are disabled and for people in work, negotiating reasonable adjustments to remain in employment can become even more challenging.

This is why, as a trade union movement committed to equality, we must redouble our efforts to work towards creating the conditions where everyone can lead a fulfilling life and has the opportunity to secure decent work.

It is customary for us to remember people who have passed away and have made a considerable contribution to the struggle for equality for people with disability. One such person recently passed away in the Republic of Ireland. I am of course speaking about Martin Naughton (pictured on screen) - a passionate campaigner for the rights of disabled people. He became active in the Irish Wheelchair Association and the Muscular Dystrophy Association and helped found the first Centre for Independent Living in Ireland. For many years, Martin also joined the Congress Disability Committee meetings to bring his unique and perceptive contribution that greatly informed our work. That rallying cry “nothing about us – without us” is stronger now for Mr Naughton’s dogged lifelong work in promoting independent living for disabled people. He will be sorely missed and I ask you to stand for a moments silence in his honour....

I wish you well in the seminar. The programme is certainly a packed and interesting one with a fantastic array of great quality speakers. Enjoy it and use the opportunity to get as much as you can from it so that you return to your unions and workplaces reinvigorated and armed with new information and skills to continue your work.