



Irish Congress of Trade Unions

Statement to the Special Committee on Covid-19 Response

Covid 19 – The Impact on the Media, Arts and Entertainment Sector.

June 2020.

Introduction

- 1.** The Irish Congress of Trade Unions is the largest civil society organisation on the island of Ireland representing over 800,000 members in every sector of the economy. Congress welcomes the opportunity to make a written submission to the Special Oireachtas Committee on Covid-19 Response regarding the impact of the global pandemic on the Media, Arts and Entertainment Sector.
- 2.** Congress has played a very active role in responding to the outbreak of Covid-19 in Ireland. As significant numbers of cases of Covid-19 began to emerge Government announced a range of public health measures to control the spread of the disease. The restrictions on economic activity associated with these public health measures meant that new income supports would be required to support workers and their families. Congress, through the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF) argued that these incomes supports should be sufficient to support a reasonable standard of living and importantly keep as many workers as possible in employment. As a result of this Government introduced the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme.
- 3.** In recent weeks, as the spread of Covid-19 has begun to be brought under control the focus has shifted to re-starting the economy and the gradual return to normal levels of economic activity. While Congress welcomes the gradual reopening of the economy, we have been clear that it cannot be done in a way that undermines the health and safety of workers. That is why Congress argued for the development of a safe return to work protocol. This protocol, which includes the requirement to have a least one worker representative in every workplace, is mandatory, its provisions must be respected in every workplace.
- 4. The Media, Arts and Entertainment Sector.**
- 5.** The Oireachtas Special Committee on Covid -19 has carried out an extensive examination of the impact of the global pandemic in Ireland. The Committee has sought and received numerous submissions and heard evidence from a range of groups detailing how their sector has been affected.
- 6.** For the Media, Arts and Entertainment Sector the imposition of the required public health restrictions has meant that activity in some areas of the sector has ceased while in other areas the level of activity has been severely curtailed. This has meant that many of our members in the sector have lost their jobs while for others their income has been drastically reduced.
- 7.** Looking first at the print, media, and digital media parts of the sector, it would be difficult to overstate the impact of Covid-19. At a time when the role of public

service journalism was never more important many media organisations are on the blink of collapse, with grave implications for employment in the sector. The decline in advertising revenue and circulation has had a major impact on the newspaper sector, especially regional newspapers.

- 8.** As the Committee will be aware advertising is a key source of revenue in the print and media parts of the sector. Advertising revenue for newspapers have been reduced to a trickle, down by 80% in some cases, with a significant dependence on advertising by state bodies and agencies. While the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme has enabled many newspapers to continue publishing and averted or postponed redundancies, there have been temporary layoffs and redundancies and some closures, such as the long standing Northside People/Southside People in Dublin.
- 9.** Another worrying consequence of the public health crisis has been a diminution in editorial resources. This has been reflected in the merger of titles and editorial positions, common papers and shared material across titles within companies, leading to a lack of editorial diversity and undermining of the editorial independence and character of titles. These developments have brought into sharp focus the failure of successive governments to tackle the issue of media dominance in the local newspaper sector, especially apparent at present in the Midlands and Mid-West.
- 10.** Broadcast media and journalists have played a critical role in the collective efforts across our society to curtail the spread of Covid-19. Their efforts in disseminating and emphasising the need for adherence to the required public health measures has undoubtedly contributed to the progress that has been made in recent weeks. However, as in the print media, the fall in advertising revenue has had a significant impact on the financial viability of many broadcasters and on employment in these organisations. The decision of the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland to waive fees due from independent commercial stations has provided a breathing space. The availability of the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme has been crucially important. The withdrawal of these supports now however would have a devastating impact.
- 11.** The Covid-19 crisis has accentuated the financial crisis at RTÉ. The costs demand for Covid-19 focussed initiatives, the massive decline in advertising revenue and inertia on the part of the Government to bring about important reforms is adding to an already very difficult situation. Importantly, the lack of progress on the establishment of the Commission on the Future of Public Service Broadcasting which was announced on 10 December 2019 is a particular concern. RTÉ was requested not to proceed with the sale of land or to implement other cost saving measures pending the report of the proposed Commission. The Commission has not been appointed and the Covid-19 crisis has worsened an already difficult position in RTÉ. The draft programme for government contains the welcome

proposal for a broader Media Commission. However, the financial crisis in RTÉ needs to be urgently addressed by Government and cannot await the outcome of the Commission.

12. As mentioned earlier in the submission, with the onset of Covid-19, activity in some parts of the sector ceased. This was the case in the film industry. All film production stopped which had an enormous financial impact on the workers concerned. The workforce in film production is a freelance workforce with a mixture of freelance employees and freelance self-employed. The rules governing the eligibility to Covid-19 support payments meant that some workers were eligible to receive support while others were deemed ineligible. This has led to significant frustration and unnecessary financial hardship for some workers in the industry. It should be noted that performers who are over 66 were also excluded from the pandemic supports. This was problematic as performers do not have industry pensions and generally tend to work past what is considered to be normal retirement age.

13. As in the film industry, many artists and arts workers in the live performance sector (theatre, dance, street performance, music etc), were deemed ineligible for Covid-19 supports. The consequences of this were and remain significant. The live performance sector is recognised as a low pay sector which as much as 70% of artists working in Ireland earning less than the National Minimum Wage. Artists and arts workers are consequently disproportionately affected by the lack of rent protection and are now further impoverished and at higher risk of homelessness as a consequence of their exclusion from pandemic supports.

14. Emerging from Covid-19 - Supporting Workers and the Sector.

15. Congress would request that the Committee recommend the following measures to Government:

- Provide for the continuation of Covid-19 related supports for workers in the sector and that they amend the rules of these schemes so that workers identified in this submission who are currently ineligible can receive financial support;
- That the Commission on the Media in Ireland be immediately established, and that priority be given by Government to repairing the financial situation in RTÉ without delay;
- We understand that Equity have made a number of recommendations in relation to actors and performers and Congress fully supports these as they are relevant to all workers in the broader sector.

16. We would be happy to appear before the Committee if required to discuss this submission in greater detail.

ENDS.