

**Address to Mandate Conference,
Congress General Secretary, Patricia King
April 23, 2018**

President, General Secretary,

I am pleased to be here today in Wexford to help launch proceedings of this your Biennial Delegate Conference.

I am also happy to have the opportunity to extend fraternal greetings and solidarity from Congress to all Mandate activists and shop stewards organised across this economy and whose work is so vital to the work of our movement.

Delegates since we last met in Galway in 2016, there have been several developments nationally directly effecting workers which are worth addressing. Let me deal , firstly with the issue of precarious work

Congress recently published a comprehensive report on precarious work and its prevalence within employment across Ireland.

The term “precarious work” ,as we know, refers mainly to a pattern of low paid employment with variable or irregular hours whether on full or part-time contracts. Many people, in such employment, are paid only for the hours they actually work which may not reflect their contract hours, or indeed, they may not be required to work at all. This results in their income being insecure, uncertain and unpredictable. These are working conditions that members in this room would be very familiar with.

Our report found that 160,000 workers work under such conditions and that 7% of the labour force are in temporary employment. While precarious practices feature strongly in sectors such as Retail/Distribution and Hospitality they are also prominent in childcare, where staff turnover is 26% annually and in the private home care sector where ‘if and when contracts’ are now the norm.

In the Third level Education Sector , for instance, it is estimated that there are at least as many people on precarious contracts as permanent ones where lecturers and tutors are hired on a part-time and short-term contract basis and are paid only for the hours they teach. This employment trend is now apparent in the financial sector, such as credit unions, where new entrants are only hired on a short-term contract basis.

For all of these reasons the Private Sector Committee of Congress, which includes your own General Secretary John Douglas and Assistant General Secretary Gerry Light has worked tirelessly with politicians from various parties and officials of the Dept. of Business Enterprise and Innovation to have legislation enacted to, once and for all, outlaw these wholly unacceptable employment practices, particularly in light of the University of Limerick Review on the matter.

In 2017 the Government published the ‘Employment Miscellaneous Provisions’ Bill. While it includes proposals in relation to Zero Hour Contracts and Banded Hours , in

our view, it is deficient and requires several amendments. Congress Unions are very clear as to what should be included in that legislation:

- We need to see the total abolition of Zero Hour, and 'if and when' contracts.
- We need to see, the establishment of a minimum 3 hour payment for workers at their normal rate including at JLC and SEO rate, even if no work is provided.
- We need to see the proposed bands for banded hour contracts narrowed with a look back period of no more than 13 months.
- The legislation also needs to include normal compensation provisions of up to 104 weeks with appropriate employer penalisation clauses where appropriate.

In order to achieve these crucial amendments Congress has met with every political party in opposition and most of the independents over the past few weeks and in the main they have pledged their support for these changes.

We expect delivery of these commitments at the Committee stage of the bill's progress through the Oireachtas, which will commence on the 17th May.

Delegates over the past decade imposed austerity measures have resulted in a level of social scarring not seen in this country before. One such scar evident to all of us, is the current housing emergency.

It arises in the context that for more than a century, social housing, in Ireland was successfully constructed, provided and maintained by local authorities. In the 30's 40's and 50's turbulent decades for our newly-emerged state, spending on social housing in this country was one of the highest in Europe. But that was an era when the State took responsibility for the provision of social housing through Local Authorities. Then in 1980's the neo-liberal belief system took hold with an ideology based on the infamous dictum, 'There is no such thing as society'. It became the conventional wisdom that the 'market' could provide these services more efficiently. This has resulted in a situation where, for instance, in the last year Local Authorities constructed just 500 hundred houses across the whole country. Thus the housing market has been ceded to the developers and landlords, profit and greed has replaced social need. This unforgiveable policy failure has resulted in thousands of people including thousands of children being either homeless or living in totally unsuitable accommodation.

The damage done to those children in their formative years will never be undone and they will never regain their lost childhood which is surely a cause for national shame.

On the matter of housing affordability, recent NERI research has found that for a majority of workers and especially for single earners renting a 'minimally adequate unit' in most areas of Dublin is 'unaffordable' and becoming even more so; that most individual wage earners in Ireland would not meet the criteria to successfully apply for a mortgage for a one-bedroom apartment anywhere in Dublin; and that two employees in the middle of the wage distribution table are priced out of the market for three-bedroom semi-detached homes in Dublin (Nugent, 2018). In light of this, the Private Sector Committee of Congress has advised affiliated unions to seek compensation, where appropriate, in addition to a minimum pay increase of 3.1%, to account for these cost of living factors in pay claims in 2018.

While some of our politicians try to normalise the scandalous extent of this housing emergency we in the trade union movement continue to demand that they act to end the misery of thousands of people. Following our recent seminar, Congress produced a Charter for Housing Rights with five straight forward demands as follows:

- A major public house building programme
- A legal right to housing
- Protection for the tenants
- An end to forced evictions
- A national land management policy

We have asked all TD's, directly to support our charter. Outside of Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, all political parties and some independent TDs have publically endorsed the Congress Charter. Our campaign team have sought to meet individually with these TD's and we intend shortly to publish the names of those who supported and importantly those who did not support the Congress Charter.

When people are next asked to elect a Government they should do so in the full knowledge that there are politicians who will take radical action to solve the housing emergency and others who favour the pursuance of a failed policy approach including the wholesale privatisation of housing supply.

I want to turn now to the subject of Brexit. One thing Delegates I think we can all be sure of is that there will be no such thing as a positive Brexit. Brexit is forecast to have a negative economic impact on Ireland, north and south, including on employment. The Copenhagen Economics study commissioned by the Dept. of Business, Innovation and Enterprise, issued in February, estimated that under a 'best-case' European Economic Area-type outcome, 10,000 workers could still lose their jobs by 2030 in comparison to a 'no-Brexit' scenario. Under a worst case scenario, where future EU-UK trade is governed solely by WTO rules, it estimated that 20,000 jobs could be lost (Copenhagen Economics 2018).

They claim that some sectors will be particularly impacted including Wholesale/Retail, an important sector in the economy which is likely to face new costs to their supply chains, and a possible overall drop in consumer demand.

Congress has warned that Brexit must not be used as a pre-text to dismantle hard-won social rights and protections or to drive down employment standards generally, and have expressly called for the establishment of a **Brexit Adjustment Assistance Fund** targeting individual workers at risk from Brexit. Congress continues to press our case in the Brexit Stakeholder Forum and we regularly liaise with our colleagues in TUC and ETUC. We have also emphasised to Government the need to uphold the terms of the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 in both spirit and content.

Delegates for many years Congress has promoted the view that the 2/3rds of Private Sector workers who currently only have entitlement to a State pension should have access to second tier coverage.

The recently published 'Pensions Roadmap' by the DEASP includes some proposals effecting State Pension provision and the introduction of an Auto Enrolment Pension Scheme. Congress are concluding a comprehensive response to this proposition which will highlight some of our serious concerns regarding State pension obligations. We are supportive of a second tier pension but it is imperative that we get the 'Model' right.

Delegates 2018 is a significant year for women. We have already celebrated the 150th anniversary of the birth of Countess Markievicz. This year marks the centenary of the suffragette movement when women over 30 were awarded the right to vote. The last year has also uncovered several incidences of workplace sexual harassment and Congress have called on the Minister for Justice to strengthen current equality legislation to protect workers in such circumstances. We have also engaged jointly with IBEC and the Minister for Equality on the terms of Transparency legislation which is crucial to dealing with the current labour market gender pay gap. Next month on 25th May a referendum will be held on the 'Removal of the 8th Amendment from our constitution' which if passed will provide women in this country with the right to choice. The Congress Executive Council has endorsed calls for its removal and urges support for this proposal.

Delegates, we know from experience that each progressive move we make would not be realised without the involvement and advocacy of the trade union movement.

Laws and state agencies can write and regulate our rights in the workplace, but it takes union members to observe and enforce them on the ground, in the factories and shop floors and building sites and offices and classrooms and hospital wards. There can be no doubt that without the recent action of Tesco or Dunnes stores workers the Government would not be contemplating legislation to improve the rights of low wage workers. These disputes instigated serious public debate on precarious work. They are the reason why a 'Banded Hours Solution' is receiving serious consideration as a solution to hours and income uncertainty. They are the reason why this nation now understands and rejects the gross exploitation of workers through the use of zero hour and 'if and when' contracts. They know and understand this because this Trade Union, Mandate, to your great credit, has never shied away from vigorously pursuing the agenda on behalf of low paid workers.

These examples also echo the theme of this conference, Organise, Organise, Organise. They demonstrate one vital message that the collective voice of organised workers does make a difference and is only effective mechanism to spearhead and deliver improvements to workers rights.

Delegates our mission in this movement, is the achievement of policy delivery, befitting of a rich country. Policies that lower the cost of living and provides access to comprehensive public services, including health and education, to enable workers and their families to live and work to decent standards. But as the OECD in its most recent study tells us income Inequality still poses a particularly acute challenge for Ireland. Its economic survey points out that Ireland had the second highest level - after Greece, while acknowledging that these levels are 'greatly reduced by our well-functioning social transfer system, the largest across all OECD countries. This means that , in effect, the State subsidises, low paying employers.

Delegates , we have discussed many times, the extent of the 'Low Pay' problem in this country. Just under 70% of earners earn at or below the average industrial wage. That predicament arises directly as a result of the absence of a right to Collectively Bargain in this State. As you know our current laws don't even officially recognise our right to exist as a movement.

We did make some progress in the 2015 Act and throughout the decades through relentless efforts and battles of the Trade Union Movement, have sought to mitigate the power imbalance between labour and capital. But, as some of your conference motions recognise, this situation will only be addressed when we achieve Collective Bargaining rights, where workers can bargain the value of their labour, without fear and claim their fair share and where members of Trade Unions can exercise their right of access to be heard.

Delegates this is the real key enabler of equality. It is the task of the Labour movement to seek to achieve it. We must take every available opportunity to campaign, to achieve this fundamental right.

We can realise our goal if we, in solidarity, do as your conference theme advocates ; Organise ,Organise, Organise. I look forward to continuing to work with you and I wish you a successful and fruitful conference.

Thank you