



## **Opening statement to the Oireachtas Climate Action Committee**

Chair,

On behalf of Congress and our Energy & Natural Resources Sector Group, I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to appear here today.

The unions that comprise our Energy & Natural Resources' Sector Group represent thousands/ tens of thousands of workers in the energy production and distribution sector – all of whom are directly affected by climate change.

I understand that you have been tasked with considering the recommendations of the Citizens Assembly on this issue and to consider how we can make Ireland a leader in climate action.

Your deliberations also take place in the context of the development of the Integrated Energy & Climate Action Plan, for consideration by the European Commission, a process into which your final report will feed.

Our delegation would like to focus in particular on Recommendation 7 from the Citizen's Assembly report, namely:

*"The State should end all subsidies for peat extraction and instead spend that money on peat bog restoration and making proper provision for the protection of the rights of the workers impacted with the majority 61% recommending that the State should end all subsidies on a phased basis over 5 years."*

Clearly, workers in this sector and in other 'carbon heavy' sectors will face significant challenges in the coming years. Congress made a submission to the Citizens' Assembly which acknowledged this fact and also made the case for a **Just Transition** to a low carbon economy.

The concept of a Just Transition originates in the international labour movement and, over time, it has become the benchmark in terms of how we should respond globally and nationally, to this challenge. In essence, it means that workers and their communities must not shoulder the burden. As the union campaign slogan says: "*There are no jobs on a dead planet.*"

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) recommends that transition policies must therefore:

*"Pay special attention to the industries, regions, communities and workers whose livelihoods might experience the hardest impacts of the transition;*

*In practical terms that requires governments to "formulate accompanying policies through social protection, including unemployment insurance and benefits, skills training and upgrading, workforce redeployment and other appropriate measures..."*

Critically, repeated studies of this process and examples of best practice from Spain, Germany and Australia demonstrate the necessity to ensure the process is based on social dialogue, with close coordination between the government, state agencies, employers and trade unions.

For example, Spanish unions recently (Oct 2018) agreed an historic Just Transition deal with government and employers, with respect to the country's coal mining industry. The deal will see €250 million invested in the mining communities and in supports for the affected workers.

It has been hailed by the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) as a model of Just Transition. The ETUC noted: "*We don't need to choose*

*between a job and protecting the environment. It is possible to have both."*

In the Australian town of Port Augusta, unions worked with local businesses and citizens to develop their own Just Transition plan, in advance of the 2016 closure of the town's coal-fired power station. Their research found that a solar thermal plant was the best option to enable a smooth skill transfer and to ensure a long term clean energy solution. The new solar plant will create 1,800 jobs and save 5 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions. But it will also help the wider community reap the benefits of a zero carbon future.

In addition, Australian unions – facing the closure of all coal fired power stations in the near future – recently published a study that highlighted the example of the Ruhr in Germany, a region long synonymous with fossil-based enterprises and now home to new green industry. The secret was planning, social dialogue and coordination with all affected.

The study contrasted the success of the Ruhr with the disaster that has befallen the people and communities of Appalachia, where no Just Transitions measures were put in place to deal with the closure of mines in that region.

The issue has been brought to the fore here with the recent announcement by Bord Na Mona of a plan that will see the loss of 150 jobs before Easter 2019 and up to 850 redundancies in the peat harvesting business by 2025.

It is a devastating blow for the midlands and illustrates the immediacy of the challenges posed by climate change to the workers, their families and the wider communities.

Congress [responded](#) by calling for the establishment of a Just Transition Forum and has also initiated work with the Nevin Institute and unions in the energy and natural resources sector to develop concrete propositions on how we might achieve a Just Transition for the region and to identify

the supports that will be required to do so - along with the many opportunities that this will present.

As the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) notes: *"The transition to low-carbon, environmentally and socially sustainable economies can become a strong driver of job creation, job upgrading, social justice and poverty eradication..."*

This call was echoed by former president Mary Robinson in a recent keynote [address](#) to a climate action conference in Dublin, where she stressed the importance of Just Transition and the need to ensure that the rights of communities in the midlands are protected in this process.

That is why Congress has also recently written to Minister Bruton, seeking his support for the Silesia Just Transition Declaration at the COP 24 meeting in Poland this week and to return with a commitment to develop and implement such a transition here at home.

It is our hope and that the Integrated Energy & Climate Action Plan will include concrete proposals on establishing a Just Transition Forum for the midlands and the wider economy. There are no shortage of guidelines and examples of best practice in this area – including those cited here and those agreed by the world's governments, employers and unions at the ILO. A Just Transition represents our best chance in terms of tackling climate change in a manner that ensures nobody – including workers and communities in the midlands – is left behind.

Thanks Chair.