

Statement on behalf of the Irish National Teachers' Organisation to the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement

Perspectives on constitutional change in the area of finance and economics and the impact on workers' rights, north and south of the border

September 2023

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Introduction

A chathaoirligh agus baill den choiste,

Ba mhaith liom ar son Chumann Múinteoirí Éireann buíochas a ghabháil libh as an cuireadh labhairt libh inniú.

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) is the oldest and largest teachers' trade union and education professional body on the island of Ireland representing 52,000 teachers and organising in primary and special schools in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) as well as in nursery schools, primary schools and post-primary schools in Northern Ireland (NI).

As General Secretary of the INTO, I am very pleased that the joint-committee has sought input from an education union, while exploring the important issue of workers' rights for the people who work on this island and for those who aspire to work here now and in the future.

Cross border co-operation in the education sector

In recent years there has been a lot of collaboration between educators North and South. The *2022 ESRI North-South Comparison Report of Education and Training Systems: Lessons for Policy* highlighted the need for closer co-operation in areas like: early school leaving, special education, teacher wellbeing and socio-economic disadvantage as there are glaring gaps between the approaches taken in the two jurisdictions.

The *Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South* (ScoTENS) has fostered strong links between educators in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The Middletown Centre for Autism (which is a North-South initiative) has brought great benefit and the funding associated with successive EU PEACE programmes has been very welcome.

Indeed already this week two very welcome North-South reports have been launched: one by the Department of An Taoiseach's Shared Island Unit and the ESRI on *Student Mobility in Ireland and Northern Ireland* and another by Ulster University on *Education and border communities North and South*. The INTO takes every opportunity to engage with North-South initiatives which we believe have great potential to improve the education systems on this island. We also work closely with sister unions in the Northern Ireland Teachers' Council and the British and Irish Group of Teacher Unions (BIGTU).

Regrettably there has been no common approach to improving the terms and conditions of those who work in the education sectors North and South. The INTO will continue to advocate for teachers to be given the best opportunities to have proper work-life balance, so that the children and young people of this island can benefit from having teachers who are highly motivated, energised and satisfied in their workplaces. In our view, terms and conditions need to be better for all the teachers of this island. Whether a teacher works in Coleraine or Cork, Ballymena or Ballymun their rights and entitlements should be similar and the best that can be negotiated. As a well-respected professional organisation for the last 155 years, we have successfully campaigned for the rights of our students too. In that regard we view the ongoing use of academic selection to be a major detriment to social progression through education in NI and urge the committee to share our view on this issue for the sake of future generations of workers who attend NI schools.

Changing political landscape on the island of Ireland



In the context of constitutional change and a move towards a new Ireland, now is the time to be examining the terms and conditions available to education workers in NI and ROI, to see what lessons can be learned, identify best practice and to take advantage of the best opportunities available, so that when the remaining key objectives within the *Good Friday Agreement* are being met, workers' representatives will be strongly positioned to lead the way in proposing new, agreed terms and conditions for workers which fully reflect the needs and wishes of workers including teachers. The high-level consultations between education stakeholders in NI on nine work streams which are designed to modernise the education system have been worthwhile and when the findings are implemented long-standing issues relating to teacher workload will be addressed. A similar engagement would be worth considering in ROI.

As the only all Ireland teachers' union, the INTO is acutely aware of the differences in conditions of service for teachers across this island. These differences are exemplified by transitions from each level of the education systems; the length of the school year; the expectations on teachers in the North flowing from the *Jordanstown Agreement*; the accountability agenda; school governance; teachers' salaries and the length of salary scales; the different funding models for schools north and south; as well as the approaches to special education and to supporting pupils and students who are impacted by educational disadvantage. While there are many differences highlighted here, one common factor between both jurisdictions is the level of workload on school leaders and teachers. This is something that needs to be addressed.

In any new and inclusive shared island all of these issues and more should be harmonised, merging the best of the education systems North and South in order to mould one great system for all who work and learn in our schools. Perhaps a move towards one Teaching Council for the whole island might be a good starting point.

Work opportunities for teachers North and South

The INTO feels strongly that the movement of teachers pursuing employment on the island should not be restricted and that where opportunities present themselves fully qualified teachers should be permitted access to jobs in schools on both sides of the border. We have been engaging with the Teaching Council here to ensure that NI registered teachers who apply for registration in ROI are fast-tracked and pay the same application fee as ROI teachers. We also support the full registration without conditions of primary teachers who graduate in NI with Gaelige and we have urged the Department of Education to provide free courses for teachers from outside ROI who are striving to achieve the Irish language requirement. The late Seamus Heaney was a teacher who moved from North to South, educating and inspiring students on both sides of the border. Education is the great leveller so we must ensure that we dismantle any barriers that exist for teachers North or South to worth-while travel and work anywhere on this Island. There are many instances of our members working on both sides of the border in particular those who choose to do part-time work and those substitute teachers who have not yet secured permanent or long-term contracts. However very few teachers who have permanent contacts cross the border to work.

Recruitment and retention crisis in Schools

Schools are currently grappling with recruitment and retention crises in both jurisdictions.

In order to address these crises we must make the teaching profession much more attractive on this island. The members of our union are deeply concerned about the number of younger teachers who have felt compelled to leave our shores due to the housing and cost of living crises. But there are other reasons for their exodus including massive class sizes and limited opportunities for career progression. Those who have been living and working abroad since new teachers' salaries were slashed in ROI a decade ago might hope to one day return to



Ireland, but they will be pragmatic. They won't abandon leadership or management responsibilities, higher salaries and allowances to move home. A now 14-year moratorium on promotional posts in ROI schools – along with the gutting of allowances for additional qualifications and specialised work – has eroded vital career pathways in our schools. The restoration of these would incentivise teachers to remain here and act as an inducement for more teachers to return. This week's ESRI report on third level student mobility within Ireland should also be interrogated. It behoves the authorities in ROI and NI to provide sufficient teacher training places for the requirements of the education systems here, rather than forcing so many aspiring teachers to travel to England, Scotland and Wales to pursue initial teacher education courses.

Teachers' employment rights

Following Brexit opportunities for Northern Ireland teachers' professional development through various schemes funded by the European Union have been affected, and this includes the opportunities for students. Although in terms of Brexit, there was no diminution of terms and conditions for teachers within NI, neither has there been any improvement.

Some notable conditions available to primary teachers in ROI include:

- The right to apply for a contract of indefinite duration from the beginning of the third successive year of employment in a school;
- The right to be redeployed when a permanent position is suppressed in a school;
- The building up of supplementary panel rights for teachers who undertake fixed-term or substitute work which gives priority access to permanent jobs;
- Leave and entitlements including breast-feeding breaks, domestic violence leave and parental/adoptive leave for same-sex couples.

In fact many of our members would argue that the draconian cuts to the education budget in the North and the lengthy pay freeze they have been enduring has seriously eroded their terms and conditions. The stark example of the pay disparity for Northern Ireland's teachers can be seen in the comparison between the starting salaries of primary teachers: ROI (€41385) and NI (€28,009), nearly a 50% differential.

The long absence of the Northern Ireland Assembly has angered INTO members who have resorted to taking industrial action in pursuit of a fair pay award and in opposition to the cuts imposed on public servants and public services. The British and Irish governments must intervene to end this impasse.

We are deeply concerned that the consistency and standardisation of individual employment and union rights of our members North and South which emanated from various EU directives will not be a feature in the future. Although employment rights in Northern Ireland are devolved regrettably it has been necessary for us to continuously highlight the failure of Ministers for Education and the Economy to improve the employment rights of our members in NI.

We are determined to ensure that improvements to our ROI members' employment rights and rights to representation by their union will be mirrored for our members in NI and hope that your committee will support that position.

Go raibh céad maith agaibh.

John Boyle, General Secretary