

Opening of Joint Disability Forum 17th April 2012

On behalf of the ICTU Disability Committee, it gives me great pleasure to welcome you all here this morning to this Joint Disability Forum, organized by ICTU and the National Disability Authority. This event is designed to showcase relevant NDA work to key trade union stakeholders, to provide an opportunity for an informed discussion on a comprehensive employment strategy for people with disabilities, and also to look at the promotion of positive attitudes to disability in the workplace. I look forward to productive and interesting presentations and discussions.

The ICTU Disability Committee is one of a number of Congress Committees in the general area of equality. The Committee is made up of nominees of the constituent unions who have a particular interest or expertise in the area of disability. It keeps unions up to date with the disability issues, as well as influencing Congress policy in the area. Over the years, it has initiated Congress actions in the area of disability, including the Workway project and the Disability Champions project. While our primary focus is on issues related to disability and work, we are extremely aware that issues such as education, attitudes to disability, transport and accessibility are key to ensuring that people with disabilities can access and benefit from employment.

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions has a long-standing relationship with the NDA, with representation on the Board, initially by Paula Carey and now by David Joyce. On the Disability Committee, we particularly value these links and we appreciate that NDA speakers have regularly addressed us, and spoken at our seminars. One area of particular interest to our members is the monitoring of the statutory target for employment of people with disabilities in the public sector. We are concerned that the Reports have shown that compliance with the target has disimproved over the past couple of years, and that this shows that people with disabilities are being disproportionately affected by lack of recruitment in the civil and public services.

We compliment the NDA on their recent series of workshops on disability and employment, and the papers that have resulted from them. These workshops brought together people with expertise in particular areas, including autism, mental health issues and sensory impairment. The resulting papers bring together a huge amount of expertise in this area, and I believe they are a valuable contribution in raising awareness of what people with disabilities can contribute to the workplace.

As a Committee, and in the wider trade union movement, we have noted the new structures being put in place with a view to creating a National Disability Strategy Implementation Plan, to be completed during 2012. We are concerned that the failure to include trade unions as key stakeholders in the consultation leaves a gap in the process, particularly in relation to employment issues.

We are also concerned about a view, which has been aired by some disability groups that trade unions are in some way to blame for cuts in disability services, encapsulated in the slogan that “there is no Croke Park for people with disabilities”. Those who have articulated this disappointing and simplistic view have stated that further cuts to disability services could be avoided if public service pay was further cut, in particular through the freezing of increments. We reject this view. The Croke Park agreement is delivering change in the public service, including in the areas of disability services. Public servants and their trade unions well understand the need for bringing stability to the public finances, but they are determined that it can be done without further erosion of their pay. Significant savings have been achieved, through reduction in pay, reduced staffing but also through the implementation of change and reform in services and organizations. For example, almost €1 million was saved across Saint Michael’s House disability services through change and reform. There is no merit in trying to set those depend on disability services against those who work in them. What both workers and service users need is managed change, in a stable environment. That is in everyone’s interest.

I want to thank the National Disability Authority for hosting today's Forum, and also to thank in advance for their input. I look forward to the presentations, and to the discussion which I am sure will follow.

Deirdre O'Connor
Chairperson
ICTU Disability Committee