

Comrades,

This is the last time I will have the honour of introducing the Northern Ireland section of the Executive Council Report.

I wish that the news I bring was better, that I could be more optimistic for our society and the prosperity and security of the people we represent, that our communities were at ease with one another and that our elected rulers were dedicated to the progressive betterment of all who live in Northern Ireland.

I wish that I could tell you all here today, that 17 years after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, that the pledges made at the time by the politicians were honoured, and that Northern Ireland had not become a political football for parties in Stormont, or, for that matter, Dail Eireann.

When I last addressed this gathering, two years ago in Belfast, I declared that the trade union movement was the opposition to the enforced consensus from Westminster. That consensus was that the deficit was the gravest crisis we faced and that the only cure was austerity heaped upon austerity.

The Tories have just been elected on a manifesto they had never dreamed of having the chance to impose on the country. It was a right-wing wish-list – even far-right by European standards – and was designed to be their opening round in the event of negotiating a coalition administration.

And now, as everybody knows and nobody expected, they have a majority in the House of Commons and the backing of a rabid Tory press to do the following:

To re-shape employment law in Great Britain to ensure that it will be virtually impossible to go on strike, and even then to open unions to unlimited claims by any passing complainer.

To legalise scab labour by allowing agencies to supply strike breakers.

To bankrupt unions by removing deductions at source for union subs.

To shrink facility time for union activities, for representing members and encouraging union learning.

To make political campaigning by unions as difficult as possible, thus silencing us further.

All of this building up to their ultimate goal – the removal of the UK from the European Union, and its progressive labour legislation.

They want to go even further, removing the UK from the European Convention on Human Rights, obliterating the Human Rights Act - a core component of the Good Friday Agreement.

This bolsters our determined campaign for a Northern Ireland Bill of Rights.

On top of that, they wish to open the NHS to private operators, outsource public services to their preferred providers, Serco, Capita and A4E, and cut taxes even more for the rich.

But the key change, is their ideological attacks on the marginalised and the working poor under the guise of welfare reform.

Northern Ireland is currently being helped to ransom by the Tories and their Welfare Reform Bill.

Here are the real facts about welfare.

SLIDE 1

This first slide shows that, indeed, the cost of welfare has increased in the UK. Since 1984, the cost has doubled to over £200 Billion annually.

SLIDE 2 (Welfare Pie)

The next slide exposes the cruel lie that most of the benefits budgets go on people too lazy to work or are on the fiddle. Job seekers Allowance takes up 2 per cent of the pie.

12 percent (the red slice) is housing benefit – to which I shall return in a moment.

14 per cent is Tax Credits – rumoured to be the target for Chancellor Osborne tomorrow.

The largest by far is pensions – 40% - to which we must add Pension Credit, Winter Fuel Payments, most of Carer's Allowance, and other items which mostly benefit retired people, such as free travel and reduced TV licences.

SLIDE 3

This slide shows the number of UK residents claiming housing benefit – it was around five million 30 years ago and it around five million now. Now see what has happened to the cost.

SLIDE 4

It has increased four-fold in the same period. From just over Six Billion to just under £25 billion per year.

Why? Two reasons – housing bubbles in the late Eighties and the last decade and the effective prevention on building new social housing, dating back to Thatcher's 'right-to-buy' scheme which barred local councils from using the proceeds to build new homes.

Who gains here? Landowners, property speculators, slum landlords. Spivs, as they used to be called.

SLIDE 5

Tax Credits were and are a good idea. The problem is that without pressure on employers, they will use tax credits as a reason to pay wages that alone cannot be lived upon. The state is subsidising starvation wages by employers and over-valued rents through Housing Benefit.

The figures are mind-boggling, and occasionally emerge. Last week, Tesco PLC held its annual shareholders meeting in London. There was a mild revolt at the £4.1 million remuneration package for its new CEO, Dave Lewis, but all went well and the City of London block vote carried the day, as always.

Part of the rebellion by some Tesco Shareholders was Tesco's Low Low Wages. There were demands that Tesco pay the living wage. And then this figure was revealed.

£364 million.

That is the amount that the UK taxpayer spent on tax credits for Tesco workers last year, according to the campaign group Citizens UK.

More than a third of a billion pounds from the state every year to subsidise a company which had a stock market value of £14 billion, before its recent difficulties caused by its incompetent and hugely overpaid management.

In fact, Tesco, Asda and Sainsbury's cost the UK taxpayer well over £700 million in subsidies for their low wages, which helped them post profits of £3.8 Billion between them.

There are only two things that can improve the lot of the underpaid, and neither of them are cuts to Tax Credits or Housing Benefit.

Those two things are state action and collective bargaining.

Comrades, we have a fight on our hands.

And we can win this fight. Do not listen to the voices of despair who tell you that the odds are too high, and that nothing has been achieved.

This movement has led the opposition, was vilified for doing so, has delayed and even stopped the worst plans of our opponents.

If it was not for the trade union movement standing strong and united, Northern Ireland would be a far worse place for ordinary workers and their families.

The entire neo-liberal fantasy imbedded in the Stormont House Agreement would have rolled out – welfare cuts for the disabled and working poor, asset sales of public land and privatisations of public utilities, mass redundancies across the public sector and a huge cut in Corporation Tax for big business.

All of the main parties were signed up – until someone shouted ‘stop’. That someone was the collective voice of this movement, travelling across Northern Ireland and speaking at over 30 public meetings and dozens of union branches, phoning into radio programmes and making noises on Twitter, writing letters to local newspapers and badgering elected politicians.

We organised protest rallies and public meetings highlighting the destructive impact of cuts on local communities affecting health, education, public transport and other vital public services.

There were other struggles which we lost, brave fights such as that to maintain the Driving Licence Agency in Coleraine. But one outcome of those local campaigns, in Mid-Ulster, on the north coast of Antrim, in south Down and West Fermanagh, is the daily proof to people who are not members of our movement realising what a resource to the entire community a strong and active trades council is, how important local trade union branches are to everyone in a town, not only union members.

Comrades, we stand with the victims of racist attacks in Belfast, as we stand with the victims of power, be they Colombian and Bahraini trade unionists, South African miners, or the children of Gaza.

But we are, most of all, the collective voice of our members. On March 13th this year, many took the ultimate step, a massive strike across all sectors, with thousands filling the centre of Belfast, making clear to the political and media and business class, and the overseers in Dublin and London, that what was prescribed as the ideal future in the Stormont House talks was not in our name and not in our interest.

That dispute is ongoing, and will intensify in the autumn. Almost every public sector union has a mandate for some form of industrial action, up to

and including strike action. We remain resolutely opposed to the economic and social cost of the Stormont House Agreement, and will continue to oppose it regardless of fantasy budgets or back-room deals at Stormont.

Stormont House did not address what it was supposed to deal with – the legacy of the conflict, the trauma of the conflict and the consequences of the conflict. The highest suicide rates in these islands and the lowest paid jobs.

At the beginning of the whole debacle, we submitted to all parties and the three governments, a paper which identified six reasons why Northern Ireland requires additional funding and not austerity.

The six areas affected by what we call the ‘Troubles Premium’ are:

Mental health problems are far higher than the rest of the UK, with enormous concentrations in areas close to ‘peace lines’.

Poverty and deprivation– which is persistent and intergenerational, deepened by 40 years of conflict.

Security – the most expensive policing in the UK, because of the unaddressed blight of **Sectarianism** – which has led to decades of **Underinvestment**, and is reproduced in part by the segregation in our **Education** system – a multi-tiered complex which segregates at the age of 4 by faith & by class at 11.

Then there is the social cost - 80% of Protestant Boys on Free School Meals who leave school without any usable qualifications.

In all of these categories, the statistics place Northern Ireland among the worst in the UK.

These are the crises that need to be addressed, and Stormont House did not deliver. This month, we will still have massive sectarian tensions and the real chance of sectarian violence, because there is no real agreement on the causes and the consequences of the conflict from which we are still, slowly, emerging.

Stormont House – Welfare Reform – Transforming Your Care - A Fantasy Budget – the Deficit Crisis:

All of the above were portrayed as crucial for rebalancing the Northern Ireland economy. What a nonsense!

It was left to the trade unions movement to put forward the alternative.

So we produced 100,000 copies of a newspaper, and sent it to workplaces and community centres and other public places.

Following the General Secretary's initiative on the Congress Charter for Fair Conditions at Work, we launched the Northern Ireland version last week.

Two weeks ago, a new concordat with the student movement, initiated by the ICTU Youth Committee in Northern Ireland and NUS/USI, the

representative body of over 200,000 students. Part of that agreement is to work together to deliver training for youth and student activists in organising on campuses, in workplaces and in our communities.

Three weeks ago, we worked with Amnesty International and the Rainbow Project to deliver the largest demonstration ever in Northern Ireland for Civil Marriage Equality for all of our citizens.

These are the tasks we do –promoting equality, decency, education and the power of collective actions in workplaces and in society.

We have other allies, some in political parties, as well as our friends and members in every community and our comrades in the trade union movement in England, Wales and Scotland.

We have our arguments, fashioned by NERI and other hands and minds in our movement.

We have to deepen our engagement with the membership of this movement, develop the next generation of activists, shop stewards, health & safety officers and union learning reps who will stand in the way of those who wish to drag our society backwards.

Comrades, we will lead the resistance to the Tory plan to destroy that which makes our people strong and our society civilised.

Every core value of this movement is an obstacle to the Tory plan.

We stand for fairness, equality, prosperity, opportunity and justice - the hallmarks of the Good Friday Agreement, in words and in spirit.

Our business is the unfinished business of 1998.

Let us complete that task.

I commend this report to conference.

Thanks...