

THE

PUBLISHED IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE IRISH CONGRESS OF TRADE UNIONS

# UNION POST

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APRIL 2012

**Hands up  
if you hate  
welfare  
reform...**

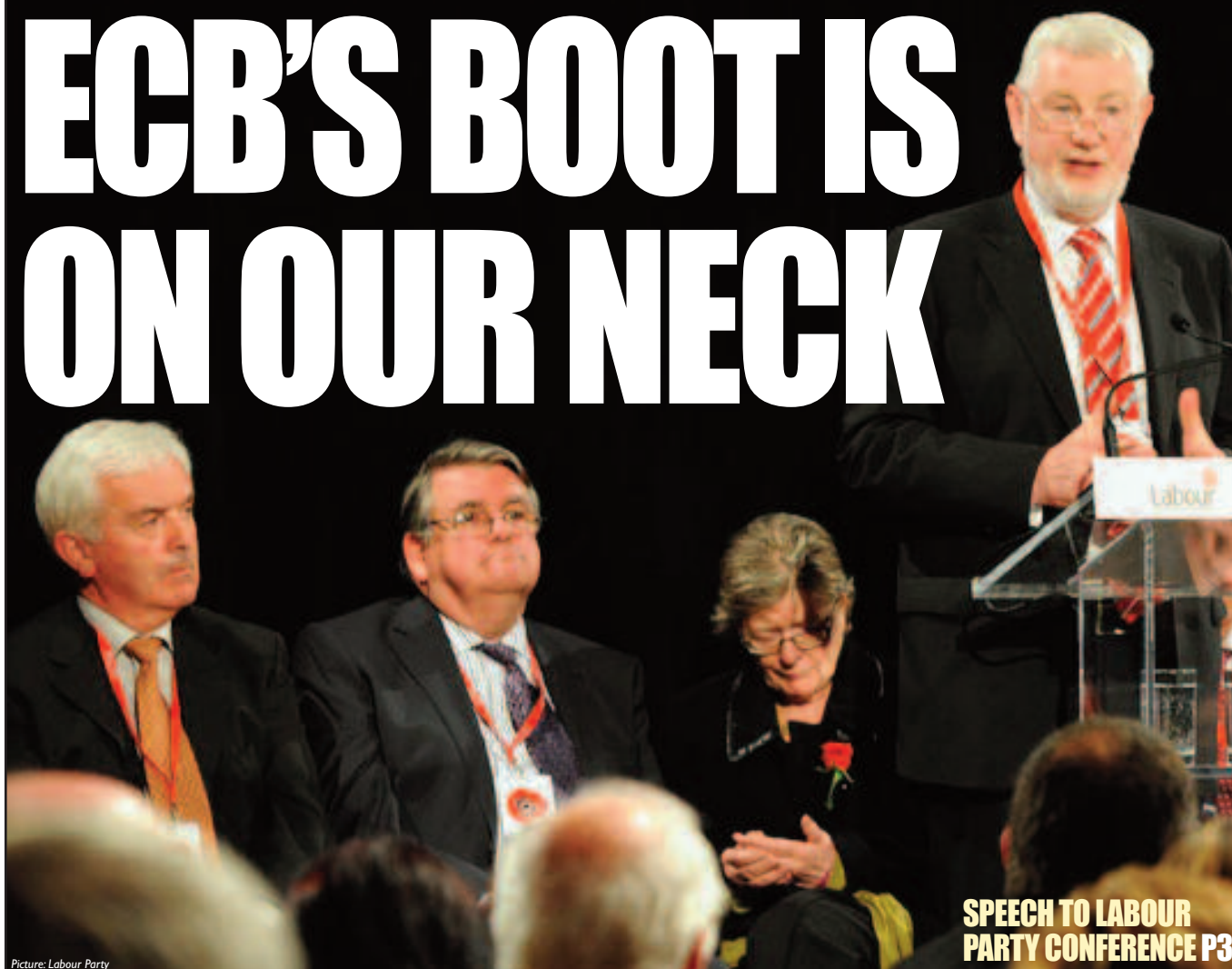
**NIC-ICTU BDC REPORT P2**



Picture: Kevin Cooper/Photoline

**BEGG: IRELAND A LABORATORY FOR FAILED POLICIES**

# ECB'S BOOT IS ON OUR NECK



Picture: Labour Party

**SPEECH TO LABOUR  
PARTY CONFERENCE P3**

**APR 28 WORKERS REMEMBER THE DEAD, FIGHT FOR THE LIVING**  
MEMORIAL DAY



Stormont junior minister Martina Anderson talks to Congress president Eugene McGlone and Congress chairperson Avril Hall Callaghan following the welfare debate

# Fury at welfare reform raises temperature at NIC-ICTU BDC



Les Allamby: Urged unions to 'energise' people against the welfare reform proposals



Avril Hall Callaghan: Reminded delegates that they had the strength of numbers on their side

STORMONT junior minister Martina Anderson has insisted the Executive will do as much as possible to oppose the "the British [Government] Coalition's so-called welfare reform".

She made the comments to more than 250 trade union delegates gathered at the City Hotel in Derry on April 18 for the biennial conference of the Northern Ireland Committee of Congress.

In her address, the OFMDFM junior minister told delegates to "remember where the cuts are coming from," and that the blame should be directed towards the government in Westminster.

She also pledged that the Executive would "show leadership" in dealing with the "£2.1bn hole in our budget".

Congress president Eugene McGlone, while welcoming her remarks, called on the Executive to oppose the cuts with more force, underlining that "this [trade union] movement is solid" in its opposition to austerity.

A day earlier, the conference had opened with a welcoming address from Liam Gallagher, secretary of Derry Trades Union Council.

Mr Gallagher pointed out to representatives of 34 trade unions and trade councils that

the constituency of Foyle contained some of the most deprived housing estates in the UK.

A total of 42 motions were up for debate covering a wide range of issues. Not surprisingly, the economic crisis dominated proceedings throughout the two days, especially the severe impact cuts were having on incomes, jobs and services.

Mr Gallagher likened the government's policy of cutting public sector jobs in the hope of creating more employment in the private sector to "trying to fill the bath with the plug pulled out".

A key debate during the two-day conference was on welfare reform.

Law Centre NI director Les Allamby – a leading expert on the issue – outlined the government plan to cut more than £20bn from people on benefits across the UK.

He told delegates that this would have a direct impact of between £450m and £500m on the Northern Ireland economy "all of which would have been spent locally in shops in the more deprived areas".

Mr Allamby urged trade unionists to "energise people about fairness" and expose the faulty logic behind the austerity measures.

Following the motion on welfare cuts, delegates left the conference hall to join a short public rally attacking the policy in front of the nearby Guildhall.

Later, Congress chairperson Avril Hall-Callaghan contrasted the government cuts programme with the "cross-border flows of dirty money" of multi-nationals.

Alluding to the numerical strength of trade unions, she reminded delegates: "We hold a great deal of power in terms of sheer numbers – no political party here has as many members as the trade unions collectively have."

Congress general secretary David Begg in his April 17 speech to conference claimed Northern Ireland was in a "spiral of decline".

He told delegates: "This aircraft is going to crash – economically and socially speaking – unless the pilot pulls back on the joystick."

Mr Begg also praised the setting up of the progressive economic think-tank, the Nevin Economic Research Institute, which he described as a "powerhouse of ideas".

He said: "To put it bluntly, we are engaged in a sort of intellectual class warfare right now. But friend or foe, we do not intend to be ignored."





# Begg warns Irish Labour Party conference: 'Any notion of social solidarity dissolved on streets of Athens'

CONGRESS general secretary David Begg has warned that the European project is in danger – gripped as it is by a neoliberal ideology that is driving it to destruction.

Speaking at the Labour Party's annual conference in Galway on April 14, he slammed the role played by key EU institutions in the crisis and described the European Central Bank as "complicit" in making the taxpayer responsible for private bank debts.

Mr Begg told delegates: "The fact that the ECB was complicit in that decision and will not now take its boot off our necks to allow us to ameliorate that debt, is reprehensible.

"I do not expect much help from Europe. Europe is currently under the control of neoliberal ideologues who are quite willing to press their austerity dogma to destruction – our destruction. We are too small to matter.

"We are no more than an economic laboratory in which they can try out ever more extreme versions of policies that have already failed.

"Any notion of European solidarity, for me anyway, dissolved on the streets of Athens."

Mr Begg underlined that the crucial task at an EU level was to re-establish social democracy as "the guiding philosophy of European integration".

In an Irish context, there was a vital need for significant new investment in the economy to boost domestic demand and create jobs.

Mr Begg said Congress was working with the government on

an initiative that could see private Irish pension funds invest in major infrastructure projects.

He told delegates: "We are trying to work together with Labour ministers on this idea and it is imperative that we succeed.

"We have to use our ingenuity to get investment into the domestic economy.

"Only measures to boost demand have any chance of easing the employment situation. That is why practical initiatives for investment in infrastructure are so crucial."

Mr Begg pointed out that Irish workers were entitled to see some of their pension funds put to productive use at home

He said: "That money is invested all over the world, why not Ireland? It will cut very little ice with workers to tell them their pension fund earned a fraction of a per cent more by investing it in Brazil rather than in Ireland, if they have no jobs to retire from."

While praising the Labour Party on its achievements in government, Mr Begg said he would be "failing" in his duty if he did speak to delegates of the "soul-destroying, morale-sapping and destructive pall of unemployment".

**David Begg: We need to return to social democratic values to drive European integration**



Read full speech>> [http://www.ictu.ie/download/pdf/david\\_begg\\_address\\_to\\_labour\\_conference\\_2012.pdf](http://www.ictu.ie/download/pdf/david_begg_address_to_labour_conference_2012.pdf)



Barber: 10 years as general secretary

## Brendan Barber to retire as TUC chief

BRENDAN Barber has announced he plans to retire as TUC general secretary towards the end of this year.

Mr Barber, who informed the TUC's Executive Committee of his decision on April 18, said it was "the right time to make a change in my life".

Pointing out that he will have served nearly 10 years in the post by the end of year, he added: "The TUC has always been a powerful voice for the millions of ordinary people who depend on trade unions to better their lives and there is so much of our work over the years in which I take great pride.

"But I have every confidence that under new leadership, the TUC can go from strength to strength."

TUC president Paul Kenny said: "Brendan has made an immense contribution to the trade union movement and has been one of the most successful TUC general secretaries."

It is understood Mr Barber's successor as general secretary will be elected at the TUC's 2012 congress in September.

Mr Kenny added: "I hope Brendan will continue to make a huge contribution to the movement after he leaves the TUC. He will be duly honoured by affiliates at the Congress."

## SIPTU backs hospital demo

SIPTU has thrown its backing behind a protest march organised by the Abbyleix Hospital and District Action Group later this month.

The Sunday, April 29 march begins at 2pm at the Manor Hotel in Abbyleix, Co Laois, and will end at the under-threat hospital.

SIPTU organiser John Hubbard said the local community was angered by the HSE's failure to engage in "meaningful dialogue" over plans to close the nursing unit which has 28 long-stay residents. A closure will also lead to the redeployment of 70 nursing and care staff.

He added: "We will send a clear message to the HSE on the 29th that communities will no longer accept its continued attack on vital local health services."



# UK unions mobilise for second pensions strike

**MAY  
10**

NIPSA, PCS and Unite members are set to take strike action on May 10 in a bid to force the UK government to enter "proper and meaningful negotiations" on planned changes to public service pensions.

The action will come a day after the Queen's Speech, which is expected to include a parliamentary bill forcing through changes to public sector pensions that will mean civil and public servants paying much more every month and working up to eight years longer for a lower pension in retirement.

NIPSA general secretary Brian Campfield called on members in the Northern Ireland Civil Service to

give "full support" to the action and pointed out that civil servants would notice "increased and enforced" deductions from their wages from the end of this month because of the government's "unilateral decision" to increase employee pension contributions.

He warned his members that this was but the start of a series of increased deductions over the next three years.

Pointing out that November 30 strike had won some improvements in the proposals, Mr Campfield added: "It is essential that the unions' hand in these ongoing pension talks and contribution rates is

strengthened if we are to secure the best deal possible.

"If we do not continue to take a stand then we can be certain that the government will be unlikely to offer any further concessions to the trade unions."

Members of NIPSA's sister union the PCS voted overwhelmingly in a ballot in March to reject the pensions offer and support further action. Earlier this month, members of Unite working in the health sector voted by more than 94% to reject the package.




Health visitors, pharmacists and paramedics now face, on average, an extra £30 a month to pay for their

pensions. Unite's national officer for health Rachael Maskell said: "The government is picking the pockets of health workers by an average of £30 a month in order to pay for pension changes which will see people having to work longer to get less."

"This disgraceful attack comes against a backdrop of pay freezes and the threat of regional pay in the public sector."

"In the face of continued attacks, health workers will be stepping up their campaign and looking to join other public sector workers in taking action on May 10."

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# Ricky's hope for 'Royle' pardon

**ROYLE** Family star Ricky Tomlinson is hoping a new legal bid will finally clear his name and those of others convicted of picketing offences nearly 40 years ago.

Tomlinson was among a group of construction workers – dubbed the Shrewsbury 24 – charged under the 1875 Conspiracy Act.

A series of controversial trials in 1973 followed a four-month strike staged

across building sites in North Wales a year earlier.

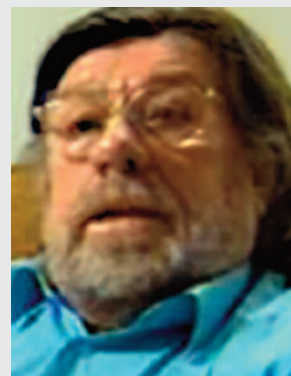
Tomlinson was among those jailed and served 16 months of a two-year sentence.

Now the Shrewsbury Pickets Campaign has brought the 24's case before the Criminal Cases Review Commission – an independent body that probes suspected miscarriages of justice in the UK.

Campaign organisers argue that the original case against the strikers was politically-motivated, claiming it constituted an abuse of power.

Mr Tomlinson told the BBC: "Why are we still appealing after 40 years? We're appealing because we're innocent

"I am 73 in September and I would like to have my name cleared before I die."



Ricky Tomlinson: Campaign



## Yes, Minister, we know we are in a crisis

**EDUCATION** Minister Ruairi Quinn faced a silent protest from a number of delegates as he rose to speak at the INTO conference in Killarney earlier this month.

The protest – described as "small and dignified" – was over changes to the pupil-teacher ratio in small schools brought in by the 2012 Budget.

In his speech, Minister Quinn acknowledged the good progress made in cutting the gap between taxation and spending.

However, he warned delegates that when he heard calls for more investment in education, he worried that the "gravity of the fiscal crisis" was "still not understood".

Urging teachers to support a Yes vote in the forthcoming referendum on the Fiscal Treaty, he claimed a vote to accept the deal was a "step out of our economic strait-jacket".

In her reply to the Minister, INTO general secretary Sheila Nunan said teachers certainly did understand the extent of the crisis.

She said: "Primary teachers see the escalating impact of the recess-



Picture: Labour Party

**Ruairi Quinn speaks at INTO conference while some delegates stage a protest. General secretary Sheila Nunan later responded to the speech**

sion on children and their families. Our schools see at first-hand how the number of struggling families has rocketed in five years of recession." Ms Nunan insisted it was precisely because teachers understood the gravity of the crisis that they were now calling for the reversal of budget measures.

"It is clear to everyone by now – austerity isn't working. And those who continue to advocate austerity only are becoming discredited."

Challenging assumptions behind the current strategy to deal with the crisis, she pointed out that "we are now at the point of cutting into

the bone of public services".

Ms Nunan warned: "If you keep doing what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always gotten... The Irish government has introduced five anti-crisis budgets since 2008. All have severely depressed domestic demand... the economy is still stagnating, employment is still falling, debt is still rising and our chances of meeting our commitments are fading fast.

"Ill-considered cuts," were she added, "not only damaging our economic futures but further degrading our social and economic infrastructure."

## CONFERENCE

# Govt must not rush changes to pension age

**CONGRESS** general secretary David Begg has called on the Irish government to postpone plans to raise the pension age to 68 so any impact on whether they would deepen inequality is assessed.

He made the call at a special conference on pensions organised by Congress in Dublin earlier this month.

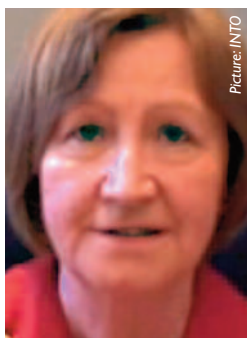
Speaking before the *Wake Up To State Pension Reform* event on April 5, Mr Begg said: "I think these changes were rushed through and not enough thought was given to the impact. Changes are taking place across Europe – but countries such as Germany, Spain and the UK are doing it in a more gradual fashion. Their pension age will rise to 67 – why has ours risen to 68?"

"In addition, we have very serious concerns about the possible impact on female pensioners. If they reach pensionable age after September 2012, they could lose more than €1,500 annually for the rest of their lives.

"As a rule, pension changes ought to be planned, well thought out and gradual. They ought to give people time to adjust. The changes introduced here run contrary to these key principles."

Mr Begg said the changes should be deferred until a thorough analysis of their impact is carried out and there is an opportunity for unions and employers to consult on the changes.

# 'We've kept our side of deal'



Picture: INTO

**TEACHERS** are keeping their side of the Croke Park agreement and the government must endeavour to do the same.

**INTO** president Noreen Flynn made the comments in her address to 750 delegates at the union's annual conference in Killarney earlier this month.

Describing the deal as a huge prize for the country, she underlined that it was in everyone's interest that it should continue to work.

The Implementation Body's

review of the agreement last June had flagged up teachers' additional productivity of 1.19 million hours a year – worth €45 million.

She pointed out that much of the commentary so far had been populist and ill-informed and aimed at creating false divisions between private sector and public sector workers.

Vowing to "fight vigorously" to protect the agreement, Ms Flynn told delegates: "It has delivered so far and teachers are determined to ensure that it continues to deliver."

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## ANTI-CUTS GROUP

# We'll stage street parties 'with a twist' for Jubilee celebrations

AN anti-cuts action group has announced plans to stage "street parties... with a twist" across the UK in the run-up to the Olympics and the Queen's Jubilee celebrations.

The UK Uncut knees-ups will be held to "resist the cuts and celebrate a future that is decided by us, not a handful of billionaires" with plans to block major roads and high streets with the festivities.

However, the group said it had to no plans to directly disrupt Jubilee ceremonies or the Olympic Games.

In an April 12 statement, UK Uncut contrasted today's austerity-era Britain with 1948 – when the Olympics were last held in London.

The group pointed out that though the UK's post-war national debt was much higher than today, there was a future for people to look forward to.

This included free universal health care, a new welfare state – to protect and support the most marginalised in society – and human rights.

Rachel Woodhead, a supporter of the group, said: "We know we are paying the price for the banks' greed

and recklessness. We can let the government and corporations control our future, or we can fight, taking our future out of the hands of a tiny group of millionaires to instead create a future which benefits everyone."

## Scrap hols figures rubbished

**GMB chief Paul Kenny has described a new report on the impact bank holidays have on the UK economy as "utter rubbish".**

**According to researchers for the Centre for Economics and Business Research, each bank holiday costs £2.4bn and scrapping them all would boost annual output by £19bn.**

**Mr Kenny pointed out that returning to work "six days a weeks" or "sending kids down the mines" might also boost the economy – but were unacceptable.**

**He added: "I'm not sure who would be in the shops, the restaurants and sports venues if we didn't have bank holidays."**

## EDUCATION

# Survey flags up damage cuts have on Irish schools

A NEW survey has underlined again the hugely damaging impact cuts are having on the education system in the Republic.

According to research commissioned by the Teachers' Union of Ireland, schools will on average have lost more than five middle management positions by the start of the next school year.

The findings, outlined at the TUI annual congress in Wexford earlier this month, showed that 62% of schools had reported an increased workload for teachers due to staff cuts.

One in three respondents reported that their workload had increased by more than seven hours a week – with 56% of principals/deputy principals estimating they were putting in an extra 10 or more working hours each week.

TUI president Bernie Ruane claimed the loss of "posts of responsibility" in particular had damaged the "support network" that was so important for "marginalised" students.

She said: "This is making it increasingly difficult to intervene early and effectively when students are experiencing difficulties – a problem that will be greatly worsened when cuts to guidance counselling provision become effective in September."

**Got a union story?**  
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## 4 in 10 school staff saw their doc over work

FOUR in 10 education staff in UK have been to the doctor and a quarter have taken sick leave within the current academic year because of work pressure, a new survey has found.

The survey, commissioned by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers and published earlier this month, showed that 73% of staff felt their job had a negative impact on their health and well-being.

A total of 62% admitted that work pressures had also affected relationships with friends and family while 64% felt it had impacted on their professional ability and confidence.

Workload, long working hours, pressure of inspections and poor pupil behaviour were cited frequently as major contributory factors.



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# Research institute launches with call for a €15bn investment drive

BILLED as "Ireland's newest think-tank", the Nevin Economic Research Institute aimed high at its launch in Dublin last month with proposals for a €15bn stimulus and investment programme to create jobs, boost demand and help economic recovery.

NERI director Dr Tom Healy insisted to those gathered for the March 27 event at the Royal Irish Academy, Dawson Street, that this was "a realistic prospect" – and claimed that such a five-year initiative would "not add one cent" to government debt or be an added burden to the taxpayer.

He explained: "In reality, it could generate resources for the Exchequer through the creation of new jobs and by boosting domestic demand."

"The funds for the investment programme can be sourced from our own National Pension Reserve Fund, private Irish pension funds – most of whom have their resources invested overseas – and from the European Investment Bank."

Mr Healy said NERI believed the investment should be targeted at areas such as broadband provision, water infrastructure, energy, early

Pictures: Paula Geraghty



**New team: Paul MacFlynn, Micheal Collins, Tom Healy & Rory O'Farrell**

childhood education as well as the retrofitting of homes.

Details of the programme are contained in NERI's new *Quarterly Economic Observer*.

The Congress-linked research institute – which hopes its efforts will help lead to "the achievement of a

better, fairer society" – has offices in Belfast and Dublin.

It is currently staffed by four economists – director Tom Healy, senior research officer Micheal Collins and research officers Rory O'Farrell and Paul MacFlynn.

**Check out>> [www.nerinstitute.net](http://www.nerinstitute.net)**

## £4bn boost for NI

THE Nevin Economic Research Institute also called for a £4 billion investment programme north of the border aimed at creating jobs and boosting demand.

NERI director Dr Tom Healy told *The Union Post*: "The programme would have an immediate impact on employment, while also generating increased activity in the domestic economy in both parts of the island."

He pointed out that just as in the Republic the investment programme could be funded by Northern Ireland private pension funds as well as by the EIB.

Dr Healy added: "The Green New Deal also provides funding models for retro-fitting of homes with limited initial government investment."



**Congress general secretary David Begg, left, speaks at launch. Dr Healy, above, with first issue of QEO**



**SIPTU's Loraine Mulligan and Marie Sherlock at the March 27 launch**



**Unite research officer Michael Taft, left, and SIPTU general secretary Joe O'Flynn spoke from the floor**

# Pulling NI govt ads will hit media jobs

NATIONAL Union of Journalists and Unite have warned that up to 12 newspapers across Northern Ireland could go to the wall with the likely loss of 580 print media jobs if the Stormont Executive moves to slash its advertising spend in the local press.

The unions expressed "deep concern" that the proposals to massively reduce government

advertising were being discussed at Executive level.

A recent review, commissioned by Stormont's OFMDFM, revealed that government departments spent £12.3m on media advertising – making up 70% of recruitment revenues for some newspapers.

NUJ NEC members Bob Miller and Eamonn McCann, NUJ IEC member Michael Fisher joined Unite

regional organiser Stephen Macauley in claiming that the move would increase pressure on an industry already hit by decreasing ad revenues.

They warned: "The removal of government advertising in the current climate could adversely impact on the economic viability of many newspapers, particularly local newspapers, thus reducing diversity

as well as costing jobs.

"The media industry is under pressure from technological change in the flourishing of digital devices to receive news.

"Accelerating problems by denying newspapers advertising could have a particularly serious effect on quality journalism which has as a core purpose in the scrutinising of those who wield power."

## Cutting guidance provision targets vulnerable teens

CUTTING guidance provision in the Republic's second level schools will increase dropout rates, ASTI president Brendan Broderick has warned.

He flagged up to delegates gathered for the union's annual conference in Cork on April 10 that seven out of 10 schools were considering cutting back on the service because of government moves.

Mr Broderick said: "This cut is specifically directed at adolescent, teenage students, at a time in their lives when they are most vulnerable."

"As well as giving professional guidance on career and subject choice, the guidance counsellor is often the only access a young person has to a support and referral service for problems ranging from mental health issues, to sexual health problems, to learning difficulties, peer pressure, alcohol and substance abuse, bullying, and issues arising from their home environment."

Picture: Tommy Clancy



Broderick: Dropout warning

## Irish uni sector needs to value its researchers

IFUT general secretary Mike Jennings has contrasted the emphasis placed on research at Irish universities with the lack of attention paid to the rights and conditions of researchers.

He made his comments at a March 30 forum organised by the Irish Research Staff Association at the Mansion House, Dublin.

Mr Jennings, quoting James Connolly's comment that "Ireland, as distinct from her people, means nothing to me", said: "Our universities seem to wish to dwell purely on the concept of 'research' while seeking to tread on the rights of the very people that they expect to deliver the research outcomes required."

## Belfast to Ballydavid!



Mission accomplished! INTO cyclists



UTU chief Avril Hall-Callaghan, Sam Geddis of Adelaide Insurance Services, INTO northern secretary Gerry Murphy, Barney Magill of INTO with Stormont Education Minister John O'Dowd at start of the 360 mile maracycle in honour of the late Frank Bunting, right Pictures: INTO

A GROUP of teachers got on their bikes earlier this month to raise thousands for the Friends of the Cancer Centre at Belfast City Hospital. The 340 mile, cross-border "Belfast to Ballydavid or Bust" maracycle was in memory of INTO's

former northern secretary Frank Bunting who died, aged 61, in August last year.

Belfast was Frank's native city and Ballydavid, Co Kerry, was where he liked to spend many holidays. The cyclists started out from Belfast on

April 3 reaching Ballydavid on April 7. They then cycled a final leg on Easter Monday, April 9, to the INTO conference in Killarney.

INTO northern secretary Gerry Murphy said: "Frank benefited greatly from the care afforded to

him at the Cancer Centre by 'Friends', as do thousands of people every year. Money raised by 'Friends' supports medical research, funds medical equipment to provide cutting edge technology to help with diagnosis and treatment."

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## GERMANY



Picture: Ver.di

Bsirske: Tough talks

## Public sector union brokers 6.3% pay deal over 2 years

GERMAN union Ver.di have brokered a 6.3% pay rise over two years for two million public sector employees.

It is thought the settlement is now likely to set a precedent in wage settlements for nine million other workers across Germany.

Ver.di – which has staged a series of selective “warning strikes” involving 300,000 workers in recent weeks – had been hoping for a 6.5% wage increase over one year.

In the end union negotiators and government representatives agreed a package that will see workers’ take-home increase by 3.5%.

A further 1.4% will be paid next January and another 1.4% in August 2013.

Ver.di chairman Frank Bsirske admitted the final deal had been difficult to accept but pointed out that the union had managed to narrow the gap with wage rises in the private sector.

## PHOTOLINE

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## SPAIN

WORKERS shouting “No turning back... General strike!” took to the streets in more than 100 towns and cities across Spain on March 29.

The mass demos mobilising more than 10 million workers followed the passing a few days earlier of a budget that predictably slashed billions of euro of government spending on public services.

Spanish PM Mariano Rajoy had warned in advance that the budget measures would be “very, very austere”.

The right-leaning government also wants to reform labour laws to make it easier to hire and fire workers and dismantle a nationwide system of collective bargaining.

Leaders of the two big unions, UGT and CCOO, spoke to thousands of activists late on March 28 in Madrid’s central Puerta del Sol plaza before the start of the strike.

Workers then spread out across the capital and the country to picket factories, businesses and transport hubs.

Unions claimed an 85% turnout for the action.

Spain’s jobless rate – at 23% – is the highest in the EU and almost half of under-25s are on the dole.

CCOO general secretary Ignacio Fernandez Toxo, warning of a new show of force on May 1, said: “If they [the government] don’t go back on the reform, there will be a

# Workers **MARCH 29** strike back!



**Mass action: More than 100 demos were held on March 29**

growing social conflict until they fix it.”

UNI Europa regional secretary Oliver Roethig claimed Spanish workers had “struck a blow” for workers’ rights “not only in Spain but across Europe”. He added: “They have shown that they will not

accept further reductions in labour and social rights, and are demanding the withdrawal of the government’s labour reform plan.

“Their message of defiance has been heard loud and clear across Europe.”



**Banging the drum: Workers are furious at plans to change labour laws**

Pictures: UGT; fotografar [CC BY SA 2.0]



Congress President **Eugene McGlone** visited Colombia in late February/early March as part of a delegation organised by the Justice for Colombia campaign. Here he writes about his impressions of the most dangerous country in the world to be a trade unionist...

# Meeting the union activists who defy the death squads

IF YOU were to Google 'Colombia', high up on the list of search results are notices from travel agents announcing the opening up of Colombia as a holiday destination.

I have no doubt that there are parts of the Pacific and Caribbean coasts that are well worth a holiday visit. However, what tourists see is totally different from the reality we discovered. Colombia has a reputation as being the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists.

According to the Trade Union Centre CUT, 2,879 trade union activists have been assassinated since it was established in 1986.

By the first day of our visit on February 26, six had been murdered since the start of the year. A total of 29 activists were assassinated last year.

More than 200 trade union activists have been forcibly disappeared (according to CUT figures, 221 are classified as disappeared) and many others have been jailed or subjected to physical attacks.

A visit to the CUT headquarters clearly demonstrates the difficulty of organising in Colombia.

It is a trade union centre like any other. It has a busy office with a receptionist and it has people who provide guests with refreshments, tea and coffee. Like any modern office it has pictures of events and people on the walls – but like no other trade union building I have entered, it has a bomb-proof, air-locked entrance. Oh, and it also has armed guards.

I agree with my predecessor, Jack O'Connor – I think the trade unionists and human rights activists I encountered are the most courageous people I have every met in my life.

People such as Tircisio Mora, the current President of CUT, Luis Alberto Vanegas, Luis Miguel Morantes, Senen Nino, Aídee Moreno, and several others.

These comrades, particularly the young women activists, showed courage that I had not yet come across within the trade union movement.

However, our meetings didn't just involve trade unionists, we met with and heard evidence from other human rights activists.

One such group were the mothers of Soacha. Soacha is a poor suburb in southern Bogotá. These

"mothers" had discovered that their sons were victims of extrajudicial executions – known as "false positives" – a scandal which broke in 2008.

It was discovered that the army had been detaining young men and murdering them before claiming that they were guerrillas killed in combat. Apparently, this was done to qualify for financial bonuses given for a high body count. These mothers have spent years seeking justice for their murdered sons.

They have, of course, been threatened because of their campaigning and their insistence that those responsible for the killings be brought to justice.

Our group travelled to Puerto Asis, in the Putumayo department of southern Colombia near the



**Eugene McGlone, back right, with other members of the delegation and local Colombian trade union activists**

border with Ecuador.

We were accompanied by Judy Caldas, a human rights lawyer, and Jairo Ramírez, a leading figure of Movis. Two organisers with the agricultural workers' union Fensuagro – E D Morano and Nidia Quintero – also joined us.

At Puerto Asis we heard from activists about how multinationals were impeding their organising work. We also heard from victims of human rights abuses.

During our stay in Puerto Asis, we held a meeting the Vice-Mayor who indicated to us that there were no political prisoners in Colombia. Almost in the same breath, he was advising us that he welcomed our visit as it would help them to implement human rights. If human rights needed to be implemented, then there was obviously a deficit.



**Hidden horror: A reputed mass grave in front of a military camp**

While the whole delegation were refused permission to enter Buen Pastor Women's Prison to meet with political prisoners and trade union activists, five of our group were allowed in. The rest of us walked around the National University in Bogotá along with the students' union president.

Later that week, trade unionist and academic Liliany Obando – who had been held in prison since August 2008 without having been convicted of, or even charged, with any crime – was finally released on "bail". There had been an ongoing campaign to win her freedom and it was uplifting to be present when she was finally released at 8.30pm on the Thursday evening.

This woman's courage is extremely difficult to put into

words on trade unionists, which they deny is happening.

On the last day of the visit we met with the Deputy Minister of Labour Relations and, separately, with Dr Andres Vilisamar, a director of National Protection Unit from the Ministry of the Interior.

Both these meetings were extremely difficult, insofar as people tell you that, yes, they know that there are bad things happening but they don't appear to have the ability to stop them.

Notwithstanding the fact that Colombia is one of the wealthiest countries in South America with abundant oil, coal and gold reserves, it also has some of the poorest shanty towns in the region.

It has a startling contradiction of wealth living cheek by jowl with extreme poverty.

And all of this forms the backdrop to the attempts by comrades to organise trade unions on behalf of workers.

The size of the country and the remoteness of some of its regions does not help in terms of organising – Colombia is as large as the UK, Ireland, France and Germany put together.

It is a country of 45 million people but yet the trade union movement in its entirety is numerically smaller than the trade union movement in Ireland.

Since the visit, two of the organisers, Sarah Merrill and Mariella Kohan, have been to Northern Ireland and Dublin.

Mariella along with her colleagues Natasha and Victor accompanied the delegation to Colombia. This visit, hosted by Unite regional secretary Jimmy Kelly, focused on the peace process in Colombia.

There is clearly a lot of work to be done and while in these times of competing demands for projects, it is my view that the Justice of Colombia Campaign deserves to be given some focus.

To this end, I am proposing that we organise a Justice for Colombia Campaign Group in the North that would be closely aligned to our counterparts in London and Dublin, with a view to generating as much support within the trade union movement and the general public as we possibly can.

*Eugene McGlone is Regional Co-ordinating Officer with Unite*



# Enjoying Belfast Parks



## A History of Malone House

Lecture by Brian McAnoy followed by a ramble through Barnett's Park

**Monday 23rd April 5pm -7pm**  
**Malone House, Barnett's Park**

Refreshments provided



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This event is part-funded by Belfast City Council through the 2012 Parks Events Small Grant Scheme.



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<http://www.youtube.com/user/TradeUnionTVIreland#p/u/0/ATDACnrVRqg>



# Jobs move lashed

**THE Communications Workers' Union** has called on Vodafone to be "straight up" with its "workers, customers, the government and the public" about the exporting of more "jobs and livelihoods" out of the Republic.

Deputy general secretary Terry Delany, left, also claimed the telecommunications giant was engaged in an attempt to "manage the message" over the shifting of more than 300 customer care jobs north of the border to Newry.

The news – which he described as "a serious blow" to Dublin and Dundalk-based workers and their families –

follows the exporting of 140 jobs servicing Irish customers to India and Egypt last year. Mr Delany said: "Vodafone continues to benefit from a profitable market in Ireland where it has repatriated an incredible €2 billion in profits on its Irish operations to its parent group, while continuing to enjoy one of the lowest corporation tax rates on company profits available anywhere in the world."

He described the move as a "further outrageous demonstration" of the consequence of successive Irish government pursuing a "privatisation agenda".



## CWU Andy rings the changes

**CWU deputy general secretary Andy Kerr speaks at the inaugural meeting of the union's Northern Ireland Telecom Branch in Belfast on March 29**

Picture: Kevin Cooper, Photoline

## UNION REPRESENTATION

# Thought provoking advice to workers from Sir Rich...

VIRGIN Group boss Richard Branson has irked US trade unionists with a personal video message directed at flight attendants who want to unionise on Stateside airline Virgin America.

As a foreign national Branson, who founded the US wing of his operation in 2005, can't own more than 25% of the voting stock or 49% of the equity in an American carrier – but it didn't stop him giving his avuncular advice to employees on why they shouldn't bring in the Transport Workers Union to represent them.

A large majority of the 650 Virgin America flight attendants have already signed authorisation cards and filed a

petition with the National Mediation Board asking for TWU representation.

In the video, Branson says he wants to "share his thoughts" on the "recent union effort" at Virgin America.

He tells employees: "You've come out with an airline unlike any other and now I believe the TWU is trying to take that uniqueness away."

Branson warns that if the TWU succeeds, it will change "forever" what "sets the airline apart", adding, "vote to protect your independent spirit and I urge you to say no to the old way of flying and to say no to the TWU."

In a subsequent blog, Ed Wytkind – who heads the Transport Trades De-

partment of AFL-CIO – countered:

"Actually, what is unique about these employees is that they have to sit at the table, on their own, and negotiate with a billionaire over wages and benefits without a union voice. That's a 'uniqueness' I wouldn't cling to."

TWU organising director Frank McCann said: "We're here to support Virgin America flight attendants in every way we can."

"We fully expect management at Virgin America to respect the decision made by the majority of flight attendants to seek union representation, and we look forward to a fast and fair election campaign."



Sir Richard: Video message



Ed Wytkind: 'Uniqueness'

**Branson video**>> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Q0I\\_9MH2GA&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Q0I_9MH2GA&feature=related) **TWU**>> <http://twuvx.org/>



## UPDATE AUCKLAND DOCKS DISPUTE



All smiles: An Auckland wharfie after clocking on at the docks

# It's back to work for Kiwi wharfies

THERE were smiles in the sunshine as members of the Maritime Union of New Zealand returned to work at Auckland docks on April 4 following a eight-month long dispute with port bosses.

A few days earlier, and after hearings at the Employment Court, Ports of Auckland withdrew a lockout notice and halted plans to dismiss its workforce and contract out the work.

Calling it "a victory for common sense", International Transport Workers Federation president Paddy Crumlin claimed the move reminded "everyone in the stevedoring and maritime industry" that the only way forward was "to negotiate

in good faith for a collective agreement".

ITF dockers' section secretary Frank Leys also highlighted the role international solidarity had played and claimed the issue of "mass casualisation" and the "contracting out of the entire workforce" had "struck a chord" with workers worldwide.

He said: "This dispute has reached beyond the borders of the docking industry. There's been action and support from seafarers, aviation workers, truck drivers, bus workers and railway staff.

"It's a giant step for the trade union movement, not just in New Zealand, but around the world as well."



Auckland dock workers return in 'victory for common sense'

Pictures: ITF

# YOUR CONCERN WORKS

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# MAY DAY FESTIVAL 2012

## Programme of Events



### Friday April 27/Saturday 28

#### CÔR MEIBION ONLLWYN (Welsh Miners Choir – Belfast)

The choir will give a number of performances in Belfast over the two days, including at the Sinclair Seamen's Church. Places limited. For information contact *Shared History Interpretive Project* on 0044 7729 728181. Sponsored by ICTU, TSSA, UNITE, SIPTU, and UNISON

### Saturday, April 28

Workers Memorial Day

#### Speaking Out for Health & Safety

Featuring Community and Worker representatives, plus David Begg, Congress General Secretary; Martin O'Halloran, Chief Executive Health & Safety Authority; John Devitt, Chief Executive Transparency International Ireland. National Gallery, Dublin, 10.30am-12.30pm.

### Monday, April 30

#### Insecure Work, Insecure Lives

*"Neoliberal policies and institutional changes have produced a huge and growing number of people with sufficiently common experience to be called an emerging class (which) consists of millions with insecure jobs, housing and social entitlements....."*

Public talk and discussion with Dr. Guy Standing, author of *The Precariat* (2011) which looks at the growth of precarious and insecure work across the world. Dr Standing is Professor of Economic Security at the University of Bath and a founder member of the Basic Income Network (BIEN), which promotes a citizenship income for all. Introduction by Patricia King (SIPTU) and chaired by John Douglas (Mandate) Liberty Hall, 6pm (doors 5.40pm)

### Tuesday, May 1

#### Dublin March & Rally

Organised by Dublin Council of Trade Unions. Speakers include Mick O'Reilly, John Douglas, Phil McFadden, INTO representative with contributions from Spectacle of Defiance and Occupy Dame Street. Assemble 5.30pm, Parnell Square and proceed to Liberty Hall

### Wednesday, May 2

#### Adalen '31

Special screening of classic Swedish labour film from 1969, depicting events during the 1931 Adalen strike when the military opened fire on strikers killing five people. On its release Adalen 31 won the Grand Jury Prize at Cannes and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.

There will be a short talk before the screening and a reception afterwards. As seats are limited, tickets will be allocated through affiliated unions. Irish Film Centre, Eustace Street, Dublin, 6pm-9pm

### Friday, May 4

#### Political Bus Tour (Belfast)

Guided bus tour through Belfast, focusing on women's contribution to political and community life in the city, such as the suffragettes and the growth of trade unions. Further information, contact Women's Tec on 0044 289074 9810

### Saturday, May 5

Belfast March & Rally  
Assemble Writer's Square at 12 noon for speeches. March commences 12.30, featuring union banners and traditional silver, pipe and flute bands.

### May 4, 5 & 6

#### Jim Connell Trade Union Festival

Annual Summer School celebrating the life of the author of the Red Flag. Featuring contributions from Tanaiste Eamon Gilmore, Bob Crow (RMT), Teresita Trujillo (Cuban Ambassador), Patricia King (SIPTU), Shay Cody (Impact), John Douglas (Mandate) and many more. For more details contact: 087 6829205 Kells and Crossakiel, Co Meath.

### Tuesday, May 8

#### The Case for a Basic Income

Public talk and discussion with Dr Micheal Collins, Nevin Economic Research Institute (NERI). Congress House, Parnell Square, 1pm-2pm

# LARKIN HEDGE SCHOOL

### Thursday, May 10

#### Public Talk: City of Larkin - Fanning the Flames of Revolution

Lecture: Dr Enda Leaney.  
Venue: The National Library, 6.30pm (doors open 6pm). Sponsored by IMPACT

#### In Praise of Obstreperous Lassies

An evening of song and music with an emphasis on women's work and women's lives. Venue: The Clé Club, Stag's Head (8.30pm)

### Friday, May 11

#### In the Footsteps of Larkin

Walking tour: Meet at the Custom House at 2.45pm. Sponsored by the TEEU  
Wine reception co-hosted by NUJ Dublin Newspapers Branch and SIPTU  
Venue: Cois Life Bar, Liberty Hall

#### An Buachail Caoin –

A Bilingual Tribute to Brendan Behan  
Venue: Liberty Hall, 7.45pm  
Wine reception at 7pm  
Admission: 10 (includes Open Session)  
9.30-12.30: Open Session  
All are invited to join in a session of music and song led by Liffey Banks

## ADDITIONAL EVENTS

### May 1-7

#### Opening Doors: Migrant Domestic Workers Speak Through Art

A collaborative photographic and textile installation by the Domestic Workers Action Group and Community Artists. Exchange Gallery Dublin <http://exchangedublin.ie/>

### May 3

Song Launch of 'One Voice' Easy Buoy featuring DWAG @ the 'Soul Worker Sessions' @ The Sugar Club, 7.30-late. Launch of Domestic workers Action Group's musical collaboration with Easy Buoy. DWAG fundraiser. A night of music hosted by Brendan Courtney and DWAG to raise awareness of rights for domestic workers. Special Guests *The Barley Mob; Ciara Sidine; Easy Bouy featuring DWAG; Deji and Hailuu; Sincop'hat; Tommy Moore Band; Gar Cox.* [info@thesugarclub.com](mailto:info@thesugarclub.com)

#### Schools Outreach Programme

Poetry and music at the Larkin Community College, Dublin, with Madara Woods and Neildh Mulligan. Sponsored by Poetry Ireland.

### Saturday, May 12

Venue: Liberty Hall Centre for The Performing Arts, Eden Quay, Dublin 1

11am-12.45pm: **Neilí Ní Dhomhnaill - Rann na Feirste: Life and a Place in Song**  
Lecture: Cathal Goan

1.45-3.30pm: **The Power of Song**  
Special guest: Jimmy Crowley

3.45-5.30pm: **The Music of Michael Coleman**  
Lecture: Jesse Smith. Introduced by broadcaster Peter Browne

8pm: **The Clé Club: Liberty Session**  
The Larkin Hedge School finishes with a lively session led by this year's Hedge Masters. Participation from all welcome. Subscription: 5 (covered by 10 day ticket) Tickets for all events Friday and Saturday at 10 per day can be purchased at the Clé Club, which meets on Wednesday night in the Stag's Head, Dame Court, Dublin 2.

Admission 10 – covers all events