

Senator Marie Sherlock Larkin Commemoration 2022

As the Labour party spokesperson on workers' rights, a proud SIPTU member and a socialist, it is a great privilege for me to address you today on the 75th anniversary of Jim Larkin's death.

Larkin was a man whose dynamism and commitment launched both my party and my union; and helped shape the course of Irish history and today we honour him.

I want to thank the Labour Party and Labour Trade Unionists for organising today's event. It's also great to have SIPTU General Secretary Joe Cunningham speaking here today and to all the members of the Larkin family, thank you for being with us here today.

I also wish to acknowledge the presence of Jack O'Connor and Des Geraghty, two others who followed in Big Jim's footsteps as the leader of his union.

As we stand at this commemoration today, I think it's important that we also reflect on another commemoration that is taking place 145 miles from here. I want to say that our party stands in solidarity with the people of Derry today as they remember their dead and the devastating events at their peaceful protest 50 years ago.

During the week I listened to the brother of Jackie Duddy and he spoke of how his brother died that day, but that he has never been laid to rest.

That open sore remains, of the events of that day and indeed the many other days of the atrocities, on both sides of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

A day like today should highlight to us the absolute necessity for a resolution to this conflict, on the basis of consent.

It's a concept that Jim Larkin subscribed to all his life.

And indeed it was Larkin who had the unique experience and insight from uniting the cause of Catholic and Protestant workers in the great Dock strike in Belfast of 1907.

It was on that basis that he established a trade union on the island of Ireland for all workers- regardless of creed, separate from the British trade union movement.

And it was on that basis that he saw the necessity for, and in turn helped to establish the Irish Labour Party.

And on a day when we recall the passing, the peaceful passing of Jim Larkin and mark his memory and we think of the violent and utterly needless death and injury of so many in Derry, that it behoves us all to think seriously about what it will take, to bring about that consent in order to agree the future of our island.

There is nothing sustainable in a sectarian headcount.

So we need to ask what serious thinking is being done to bring about that consent. It's a question for us all.

Because we know there are some people who don't want to think about what an Ireland by consent would look like.

And there are others who are simply not prepared to tell their constituencies what they think may be involved.

For me, the future of the island of Ireland must be about the building of an Ireland for all working people, inclusive of all colour, culture and ethnicity. It's an Ireland where workers have the power, and the law on their side, to demand to collectively bargain with their employer.

It's the Ireland that Jim Larkin and his sister Delia worked tirelessly for by trying to organise all workers, by proclaiming the possibilities of what a new democratic Ireland could achieve and crucially bringing hope to those who needed it.

In marking the death of Jim Larkin as the founder of the ITGWU and the precursor to our union SIPTU, for me it is also important that we speak to the memory of his sister Delia.

She left an indelible mark through her work in the IWWU. It was because of the enormous work of the IWWU that ground-breaking rights for both men and women were won.

Rights we take for granted today like the two week's annual leave per year. And I must say I am constantly reminded of that legacy and those breakthroughs when we think about the rights we in the Labour movement are trying to win for workers today.

The right to sick pay for all workers.

The right to flexible work.

The right to be able to switch off and not be expected by your employer to be at their beck and call at all hours of the day and night.

The right for those in new forms of work, platform work, to be recognised for what they are, as workers, as employees.

The right for women workers to be recognised and respected in our workplaces when they have to go through very difficult circumstances like pregnancy loss or fertility treatment.

And the right for all workers and in particular young workers to be paid for their work. We are no longer prepared to put up with unpaid internships. A system that reinforces privilege in this country.

And most importantly and above all, that right, which Delia and her comrades fought day and night for, was the right to collectively bargain.

Our current day fight for the right to be recognised for collective bargaining purposes.

With regard to Larkin's enormous contribution, we've heard the phrase used that he had the franchise on hope. And his legacy to us today was born out of his incredible capacity with his words and analysis to stir a consciousness and to mobilise the working classes of Dublin.

And that is the challenge that faces us today in both the Labour Party and in the wider labour movement in how we stir those who work, those who want to work and those who depend on the earned income coming into the household.

From all my conversations on the doorsteps and with people online, we can be in no doubt that there is a real frustration out there- a frustration that things never change.

That a decent affordable house is becoming more out of reach. That the cost of paying childcare is crippling while trying to hold onto the job that you want to get on with and progress in. That there seems to be great wage increases for everyone else, but just not for you if you are stuck in a minimum wage employment or in low paid or indeed, middle income work.

For me, the Ireland of today is a paradox of plenty.

In 2021 and despite the havoc wreaked by the pandemic, Ireland's economy expanded by over almost 16%.

Our national income grew by just half of that, and that was still a huge rise of €26bn in just 12 months.

And despite the enormous and entirely justified cost of having to subsidise workers and workplaces, the State's borrowing agency, the NTMA are saying they need to borrow less over the 2021-2025 period than over the previous years 2017-2020. Years that included some of the fastest growing years in this history of this State.

These eye-watering sums are often explained away by the fact that so much of our GDP is not real. That so much relates to asset shifting, the treatment of intellectual property and depreciation. And that's all true.

But that must not be used to excuse the Government of responsibility to distribute what it actually earns and the policy space that it controls.

As anyone trying to rent or indeed buy a house in this city will tell you that so much of our economic model is broken. Our economy is not just the case of the multinationals doing their thing up there and everyone else down here.

The Government's housing policy is now rigged towards ensuring that investors get their return- we see that in the build to rent model that now dominates such much of what is

built in this city, the €900m the Government is now pumping into the hands of private landlords because it chose not to build during years of plenty and the millions more foregone in tax paid because of how REITs and ICAVs operate in this country.

Or we have to ask the question that after years of such major gains in our country after the economic and financial crash and before the pandemic, how is it that we have thousands of students in this country facing near the impossible challenge of paying their registration fee and unaffordable student accommodation.

I came to Dublin almost 22 years ago and the debate about the chronic shortage of rental accommodation then is almost the same as the one that is raging now. But there is one key difference- in the past 10 years, thousands of purpose built student accommodation units have been built in this city.

Across Dublin 1 and Dublin 7, the full rate student grant covers less than three months of the exorbitant cost of private student accommodation. And yet last October, when there were students crying out for somewhere to rent, there were vacancies across a number of student accommodation facilities in our area.

The reality is that the opportunity to make real changes in Ireland over the past number of years has been squandered.

And it says something about our country that during those years of prosperity, Ireland had the ignominy of having the highest income inequality across the EU. We know from the 2017 Eurostat survey of income and living conditions that Ireland had the widest gap in market income between the top 20% of households in this country relative to the poorest 20%.

The reasons for this very high level of income inequality are many. And we can thank the work of Tasc, the Irish Human Rights Commission, the Nevin Economic Research Institute, Roantree, Nolan, Maitre, McGinnity and others for adding to our understanding on this.

Very high levels of wage dispersion between the highest and lowest earners is a major factor¹.

But we know the enormously high level of joblessness among some groups of households is crucial to understanding why so many are being left behind.

When compared to our EU neighbours, Ireland has the highest share of lone parents who are not in work and the highest share of those with a permanent disability or illness who are not in paid employment².

¹ Nolan B and Maitre B (2021). *Does Household Worklessness explain Ireland's high working age market income inequality?* ESR Vol 42 Winter 2021

² Roantree B (2020). *Understanding Income inequality in Ireland*. Paper to the Statistical and Social Inquiry of Ireland. March.

For many lone parents and for those with a disability, there are many structural inequalities in their lives- the availability of affordable childcare, access to transport, flexibility within the workplace.

And what message has gone out to them this week?

That if you are thinking of trying to take up work and if you were thinking post pandemic Ireland may be a more understanding and tolerant place to join the workforce, well you certainly don't have the back of this government.

Looking at the legislation published by the Government this week on the right to request flexible work, it's the case that all the odds are stacked in the employer's favour.

Every time the issue of income inequality comes up, Government claps itself on the back and points to how progressive our tax and welfare system is, in reducing inequality.

But in that we are letting capital and employers off the hook. We have let the State shoulder the burden for that redistribution rather than looking at how capital in this State can and must play its part.

And the attitude of Government this week to flexible work is yet another example of that.

It is staring an opportunity in the face to breathe new life into our rural towns and villages, while freeing up space in our cities so young workers are no longer forced out of the communities they grew up in.

It is failing to realise the potential to drive down our carbon emissions and do more to tackle this overarching crisis of our era- the ecological, biodiversity and climate crisis.

It is ignoring the gains for women during this pandemic. The gains that saw the numbers of women in full time work increase and not fall as some would have expected. Let's not pretend that the balancing act with caring responsibilities is in any way easy. I can tell you, it is not. But it can be done.

This week, the Labour party will be unveiling our proposals for a right to flexible work.

A right that is based on the notion that we can't just ignore the past two years. That account must be taken of the work arrangements that have successfully evolved.

A right that recognises that it must be possible to get a work life balance.

A right which will put what is best for workers, our communities and our planet into the centre of the debate about our workplaces and our economy in post-pandemic Ireland.

Ultimately, a right to collectively bargain is critical if we are to realise the potential of the post covid workplace.

I'm conscious that at the behest of the ICTU, the Government has committed to a review of employment rights in this country under the chair of Dr Michael Doherty. We look forward to that report in due course.

But to the Government's instincts of prioritising the employer over the worker, let a clear message go out. The world is changing. When we have leading centrist macroeconomists and high profile centre right financial journalists coming around to a view that unionisation and collective bargaining coverage are crucial to future living standards and political cohesion and stability, then we know that something is happening. Ireland must not remain the outlier.

This is a fight for which we should draw inspiration from Jim and Delia Larkin, because to draw on what Jim said of the historic early decades of the last century in which he strode – Comrades, we are living in momentous times!

Thank you

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