

SPEECH BY MICHAEL SMYTH, PRESIDENT, FÓRSA, INEC KILLARNEY, 18th May 2022

Colleagues,

It's hard to express in words my sense of delight and gratitude in welcoming you to our conference in Killarney, this evening. Tá fáilte romhaibh go leir.

I'm conscious that it has been a difficult two years, during which time a great many of us have lost people close to us.

Amidst the sense of hope and jubilation we feel in gathering together once again, equally I want to acknowledge the profound sense of loss felt among our delegates and wider membership for those they have lost since last we gathered.

Ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anamacha.

Arriving here today marks the end of many long journeys for each of you, from every corner of the country.

Being here, all together - in person again, for a biennial conference, the first time in four years - marks the conclusion of an especially testing two-year journey we've all taken together. And again, I say welcome.

Electronic communication, while useful, is limited in its ability to give us a real sense of social connection. This conference gives us a real opportunity to reconnect with one another, to debate the issues that really matter to us and to set the goals for the kind of change that we want to see.

[Fórsa / inflation/ pay talks]

Fórsa trade union is now in its fifth year of existence. In that short time the union has become more vital and much stronger.

The breakthrough on the restoration of pre-Haddington Road working hours in public services illustrates the collective strength we now employ.

Greater than the sum of our constituent founder unions, we have built an organisation determined to keep improving.

To that end, Fórsa has adopted a strategic plan that puts its members first and commits itself to build a better and stronger union that delivers for its members.

And it's never been more important to commit to that task. Inflation has put sudden and sustained pressure on workers' incomes, and the trade union movement has had to respond quickly and decisively.

National pay talks are about to get underway, and the general secretary will be returning to this issue when he addresses conference tomorrow morning. I look forward to hearing delegates in the debate on pay and national agreements.

Fórsa's work to build a **better union** is well underway. The Fórsa review report has recently circulated to branches, and significant work has been achieved, for example, in the area of campaigns, with our equivalent grades committees, establishing the union's training and development offering, and in the creation of the Solas database system.

The union remains committed to that process of reform and improvement, and to making sure the pace of reform and change meets members' expectations.

[BLENDED AND REMOTE WORK]

The pandemic was a powerfully disruptive force in everyone's lives, and Fórsa members found themselves thrust into an enormous and unplanned experiment in different ways of working since the pandemic landed.

The experience was a powerful disrupter of everyone's assumptions about the workplace.

About where the workplace is and how we connect with it.

About productivity and service delivery.

About our wellbeing in the workplace and the balance we all try to strike between our work responsibilities and those of our private lives.

As we gather for this conference, let's reflect on the fact that we've all been participants in a **seismic revolution** in the world of work. A revolution to which our collective response was rapid, effective, productive and successful.

The term 'essential worker' was radically redefined.

Our colleagues in health services rose to the challenge of providing care and clinical treatment in circumstances the rest of us recognised as truly terrifying.

We applaud their efforts.

We can all take pride in our members across **all six divisions** of Fórsa and of how you responded to the public health crisis.

You spared no efforts in transforming how services are delivered in truly extraordinary circumstances, demonstrating innovation, flexibility and the true **dynamism** of Irish public services.

This includes those delivered by our members in the community and voluntary sector, where the struggle for proper collective bargaining mechanisms, and a more sustainable funding model, continues.

We applaud too those workers in retail, logistics, transport and communications, each of whom ensured that a sense of normality was sustained in truly abnormal times, including our members in the private and commercial sectors, where the pandemic effect on incomes, for many workers, was especially brutal.

And to my own colleagues in education, I applaud the work you did to deliver education and support in schools and colleges under the most testing and difficult circumstances we've ever known.

As the world dares to take its first steps into a world beyond the pandemic, let's not forget the extraordinary response of ordinary workers.

Now the time has come to reflect on facing the future anew, with the knowledge and experience we've acquired from this radical revolution in the workplace.

In August 2021, Sarah O'Connor made the following observations in the pages of the *Financial Times*, in the context of calling on the global community to inspire each other around what a new post-pandemic world should and could look like:

"Over the past few decades, good quality jobs have become ever more concentrated in big cities around the world. This presented young people with an unenviable choice: rent a bedroom in a cramped and expensive city flat, or stay away and suffer the career consequences.

"But coronavirus taught us that many office jobs can be done remotely, at least part of the time. Policymakers should lean into this trend by improving digital infrastructure.

*This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to rebalance the economy by allowing good jobs to spill out of pressure-cooker cities. The pandemic has made a new world of work possible. **Let's not go back to a past which wasn't working anyway.**"*

Colleagues, I think this is the challenge and the mission we must set ourselves at this time. Together, we can take ownership of the discussion around new ways of working, to provide leadership in a world of work that has utterly changed.

This week we'll determine the union's policies for the future, and the issues of working time, blended and flexible work - and how it's facilitated - will be central to the discussion in this conference hall, and we'll debate a range of motions drawn from the deep well of our members' experiences over the last two years.

Colleagues, our national executive will make the case that the **normalisation** of remote and blended working **will** deliver benefits for workers, employers and

service users, while making a significant contribution to climate action, spatial policy, as well as urban and rural development.

Despite the lofty words contained in its remote work strategy last year - *Making Remote Work* - the Government is failing to lead on this. Fórsa was rightly critical of the inherent weakness of the Government's attempts to legislate for remote work.

The legislation - designed to enable an employers' 'right to refuse' remote work, rather than a workers' right to request it - revealed a government prepared to pander to every employer sensitivity and stereotype, no matter how baseless, falling back on old and outmoded ways of thinking about the relationship between employers and workers.

Instead of looking forward and harvesting the benefits we now know remote working can deliver, the Government simply looked to return to old and outmoded ways of thinking. A spectacular own goal after two years of a revolutionary real-world experience.

The Bill is currently undergoing its pre-legislative scrutiny by the Oireachtas Enterprise Committee, and we learned from this morning's media coverage that the Department of Enterprise is examining how best to strengthen the right of appeal in the draft legislation, and that employers could have fewer grounds to refuse requests for remote working under changes being considered.

That's why this union continues to work through ICTU for legislative amendments to ensure a genuine right to request remote work arrangements, as well as an obligation on employers to demonstrate objective reasons for refusing remote work, a fair and robust appeals mechanism, and strong worker protections that provide for health and safety, workers' privacy and the right to disconnect.

We continue to push for forward thinking on this issue, and there's no reason that the State can't be the driver of best practice.

Against this background, and despite the Government's reluctance to embrace the potential of remote and blended working, the union has already made a breakthrough in the successful negotiation of a blended working policy framework in the Civil Service, which can provide a template for the broader public service and beyond.

Getting it right is crucial.

Getting it right means, for example, that the State can more successfully deliver on its aims to respond to the **very real and immediate** climate emergency.

Why would we mindlessly return to clogging the roads between commuter towns and Irish cities with thousands upon thousands of private cars?

Why would we needlessly burn hundreds of thousands of litres of fossil fuel and release thousands of tonnes of carbon into the atmosphere - just so that someone can perform work that they could - just as easily - have done at home or in a remote working hub close to home?

Equally, why would people be obligated to spend a huge portion of each working day in that state of suspended animation that commuting forces upon them?

Those hours of pointless commuting accumulate into days, weeks, months and years.

Our recent experience has taught us all that this precious time can be better spent, making for a happier, healthier and a **genuinely more productive** workforce.

Pouring everyone into the city each day - and then decanting them back into the suburbs and commuter towns each evening - is an outmoded pattern of work inherited from the last century. Technology and innovation liberated us from these obligations, so why drift back to them so mindlessly?

The State can demonstrate a sense of vision that other employers can follow, and thereby reap the best of the remote and blended work experience.

The *Making Remote Work* strategy includes a commitment that 20% of public service jobs will be worked remotely.

Fórsa considers this to be a floor rather than a ceiling, and indicative of where policy can genuinely improve the lives of workers, continue to improve on service delivery, meet our climate goals and ensure a more equitable and sustainable rate of development in our regions and rural towns.

Colleagues, sometimes the greatest workplace innovations occur through unforeseen interventions.

Last week, Irish Rail's engineering works in Inchicore, Dublin marked its 175th anniversary. The history of those works includes an interesting footnote in the shift from a 10-hour working day to an eight-hour working day. The change occurred in 1919, implemented across Europe to ensure there was work available for those returning from the horrors of the battlefields of France and Belgium.

That innovation, the eight-hour working day, became the recognised, standard working day across the 20th century.

If we consider the intervention of the Covid pandemic in similar terms, and how remote working briefly eliminated daily commuting and the workplace culture of presenteeism, we might recognise how the very real innovation of effective remote and blended working policies can inform the 21st century.

In this context, let's not lose sight of the radical and innovative potential for the four-day working week, which Fórsa has proudly led the way to what is now a global campaign, and whose pilot-scheme is an active experiment in the future of work. It has the potential to deliver a dividend for workers as automation and artificial intelligence continue to drive another industrial revolution.

Equally, we must ensure that the policies we're calling for work for everybody. That means, for example, policies to ensure inclusion of remote workers in collective workplace activities, including business meetings and training and fair access to career advancement for all workers, regardless of their work location.

It also means making adequate provision for new and younger workers to have a meaningful experience of the corporate knowledge and culture of their workplace, and guard against isolating them from the necessary mentoring and guidance so crucial to the early years of their career.

Also, we need to ensure the retention of other workplace innovations that we've already usefully developed and seen implemented. Many of the motions this week seek to address the absence of flexitime in remote working arrangements.

In developing a new way of working, we can't adopt a narrow view of the full range of possibilities of how remote and blended working can be achieved, so these are crucial motions for proper debate.

[UKRAINE]

Delegates, I want to take a moment too to reflect on the continuing struggle of Ukraine. The response of Fórsa members to the union's Ukraine solidarity appeal was humbling, though not at all surprising.

I know that it was driven by the strong sense of solidarity that runs deep in the trade union movement.

As we gather to look forward and determine our response to the challenges ahead, let's keep in our minds the struggles of our brothers and sisters in Ukraine.

Let's hope that the end to the conflict is within sight. And when it ends, let us continue to stand with the people of Ukraine and their efforts to rebuild and recover from the horrors of war.

[JERRY KING]

Colleagues, as I made my way to Killarney this week I confess I carried with me a sense of sadness for all the colleagues who won't be here this week, and in particular my friend – our friend – Jerry King, who was a member of the first Fórsa National Executive.

Jerry is rightly held in very high esteem by our three founder unions, not least because Jerry was instrumental in inspiring confidence in the new union project that became Fórsa. All our present and future success will draw from his very positive legacy.

Jerry was always - sometimes obsessively - focused on what we could do to improve the lives of Fórsa members. He was unstinting in that mission, and adept at winning people over to his vision of how things should be. I will miss his unique voice at this week's conference, but let us look forward together this week in that same, unstinting spirit.

Suaimhneas síoraí dóibh go léir.

Thank you / Go raibh maith agaibh