



Campaigning for Jobs and Services

Trade Unions' policies and measures for economic recovery

Introduction

The recession caused by the flagrant actions of bank bosses has already resulted in massive job losses in Northern Ireland. The unemployed claimant count at February 2010 was 55,700, a 32.6% increase (13,700) over the previous year.

In addition, there are 570,000 people classed as 'economically inactive, and of those 48,000 were willing and able to work. To add to this bleak picture, 100,000 students will be joining the labour market soon.

Corresponding with the massive rise in unemployment, over the year to December 2009, there was a loss of 20,910 employee jobs. Worst hit were the manufacturing and construction sectors with reported job losses of 8.2% and 16.6% respectively.

The Government's multi £billion bail-out of the banks has brought huge pressures on public finances. Already Northern Ireland's public services face £370 million expenditure cuts in the 2010/2011 year with projections of public funding cuts reaching £1billion over the next three years.

If the next UK Government does not accept the advice of respected economists to increase public spending to stimulate economic growth but opts instead for more public expenditure cuts, the consequences for jobs and services in Northern Ireland could be catastrophic.

There are entirely viable alternatives to public sector cuts to enable economic recovery across the UK. For example, the UK Government could give priority to tackling the tax gap now estimated to stand at over £120 billion a year. This includes

illegal tax evasion, tax avoided by those seeking to minimise bills (not by illegal means but contrary to the spirit of the law) and uncollected taxes due to be collected. Tax evaded and avoided by individuals and large companies could be reinvested into public services. Taking concerted action and allocating the resources to close the massive tax gap could therefore go a long way to aiding economic recovery. But instead HM Revenue Customs is cutting 25,000 posts and closing offices.

Principles

This briefing summarises the trade union movement's policies and measures to protect jobs and services and to help economic growth in Northern Ireland.

It bears repeating that the trade union movement (Irish Congress of Trade Unions – ICTU) is the largest civil society body in Ireland with some 250,000 members and their families in Northern Ireland. The trade unions' policies are based on the very clear principles of equity and fairness. We are concerned with all sectors of the workforce, private and public, and all in our community who need our public services.

Trade union members and working people are not responsible for the causes of the recession. We are determined that they should not therefore bear the burden of the recovery from recession while those who were responsible and the better off escape lightly.

It is time too to reject the false dogma of private v public sector - workers in all sectors are united in their demands for economic growth and job retention in the private sector and the protection of our public services.

We believe the way forward is to adopt economic and public policies based on equality, justice and inclusion.

The Human Rights Commission recommended that Northern Ireland's Bill of Rights must include “ ***the right to work***” and that “ **everyone has the right to enjoyment of just and favourable conditions of work**”. And for those who lose their jobs or are unable to work through illness there must be a right to social security benefits that enable people to live in dignity not poverty.

Campaigning

For the last year and more trade unions' have advocated that NI Executive Ministers should adopt many of the policies and measures outlined below. We believe the devolved administration could and needs to do far more to help the working people of Northern Ireland through the impact of the recession and to a fairer and better future. The trade unions will be continuing to campaign for these policies with all political representatives.

While the focus of the campaign will be to secure action by the devolved administration, the UK Government ultimately determines the levels of public funding available to the NI Executive. The outcome of the UK General Election could therefore prove critical for the future economy of Northern Ireland and the well being of its people. For the upcoming election the trade union movement will be pressing all the political parties and candidates for their pledges of support for our policies and measures.

The trade unions' demands are summarised in bullet points below. We acknowledge that implementation of these policies and measures will fall to the NI Executive and in parts to the UK Government. We acknowledge to that the policies and measures will require further detailed development and implementation of a number will depend on appropriate compliance and enforcement measures being in place. The trade union movement stands ready to engage directly on these matters and with the other social partners.

We commend these policies and measures for implementation on behalf of the working people of Northern Ireland.

Policies and measures

Protect Jobs and Tackling Unemployment

- Top priority must be given to protecting and creating jobs in the private and public sectors.
- Public subsidies to the private sector should be conditional on job protection and employment growth and there should be a focus on developing local enterprises not short-term foreign direct investment (FDI) projects.
- To assist the unemployed or those workers threatened with potential unemployment, short-time working or lay-off, new Job Creation and Training Schemes should be initiated to include opportunities for re skilling and retaining skilled workers in the workplace
- To assist the economically inactive and long term unemployed by continuing to back successful job creation/up skilling and re skilling programmes such as the West Belfast Greater Shankill Health Employment Partnership between health employers, trade unions and the local communities and to extend this approach into other sectors.
- New specific education and training policies and programmes should be developed and implemented aimed at preventing under-25s sliding into long-term unemployment and assisting young people to change and up grade skills.
- Priority should be given to ensuring that skills match the labour market, and securing quality jobs for skilled workers and graduates.
- All relevant contracts being awarded under public procurement must include provisions for apprenticeships and assisting the unemployed.
- Strategic Investment projects should benefit all sectors of the NI economy with Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) facilitated to compete for public service contracts.

Safeguard Public Services

- Public services must be protected - it makes no sense to cut services at a time when more people depend on them because of the recession.
- It should be recognised that public services provide employment and provide real help for those who are unemployed.
- Health Services for all must be guaranteed and particularly for children, mothers and the elderly.
- Maximum investment is required in education for pupils, students and workers; in particular education provision should be more aligned with meeting the needs of a knowledge based economy with initiatives to

ensure more students undertake strategically important subjects: science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM)

- A fully integrated public transport system within public control must be maintained and developed
- The policies of privatisation and outsourcing of public services should be scrapped as these lead to more expensive and less efficient provision, and presents the public with a more fragmented and less competent service.

Sustainable and efficient economic growth

- There needs to be additional public funding secured and allocated to stimulate sustainable and efficient growth and take Northern Ireland out of recession.
- A Green New Deal could create 24,000 jobs by refurbishing homes with energy saving mechanisms as well as transforming energy efficiency in of public and commercial buildings.
- Grant subsidies should be directed to
 - Increasing employment, increasing exports and developing innovative projects
 - tackling the Research and Development(R&D) deficit in Northern Ireland which is the lowest per capita R&D spending in UK
 - improving marketing and services for SMEs & start-ups
 - developing skills base of social economy
 - supporting retraining in manufacturing
 - exploring demand after the recession
- Public banks should be required to provide credit for SMEs, Start-ups and R&D

Addressing homelessness and poverty

- Substantially more investment in Social Housing required to enable the NI Housing Executive to lead a sustained new build programme.
- Ensure that measures are in place to prevent home repossessions by banks and building societies.
- Protect older workers from fuel poverty.
- Advocate for sustainable state pension as a universal right for all.

Public funding and implementation

- The current freeze on domestic rate increases and rates cap benefitting the better off should be ended so that all contribute fairly to the provision of public services and recovery from recession.
- No separate household water charges should be implemented in Northern Ireland and a fair contribution to water and sewerage services should continue to be included in domestic rates bills.
- The UK Government should initiate strong measures aimed at closing the UK tax gap, including recruiting HMRC staff and ensuring tax loopholes are closed
- Options for NI Executive to raise additional funding for investment in public services should be fully examined.

Equality, Justice and inclusion

- Implement a comprehensive Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, which must include social and economic rights as proposed by the Human Rights Commission.
- All policies and measures must be subject to proper equality impact assessments being conducted and their findings implemented.
- Appropriate mechanisms implemented to ensure the social partners particularly the trade unions are fully consulted and engaged by Government and public bodies on implementation of these policies and measures.

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