



Triennial Delegate Conference
Europa Hotel, Belfast
Friday 17th - Saturday 18th May, 2024

Opening speech by John O'Connell, General Secretary of the Financial Services Union to the FSU Triennial Conference, 2024 in the Europa Hotel, Belfast

I am delighted to welcome you to Belfast and to the Triennial conference of the Financial Services Union.

It is an honor for me to address you today as the General Secretary of the Financial Services Union.

A union that has a proud track record of service to its members.

A union that always strives for excellence and a Union that has its members' interests at its core.

Our history is of a union that adapts to changes, that faces challenges head on and fights for what is right.

Since our last conference we have faced many challenges.

Ulster Bank and KBC exiting the retail banking market was a body blow for our members and for consumers and has changed the banking landscape in the Republic of Ireland but not in a good way.

We have worked tirelessly over the last two years to save jobs, protect customers and to ensure that the largest logistical change project since the introduction of the EURO went as smoothly as possible.

Hundreds of staff have since transferred from Ulster Bank and KBC to other retail Banks.

I am proud to say that these jobs have been saved and members pay, and conditions protected by their union.

I would like to thank all the FSU staff and others in this room who fought the good fight and won for our members.

Access to cash and the attempt by some banking institutions to limit access to cash by the removal of ATMS and rollout of cashless branches was resisted and overturned due to public pressure and a dedicated campaign from the FSU.

Our campaign to ensure communities were not devoid of local banking services and people were able to access cash has resulted in proposed legislative change and we wholeheartedly welcome this legislation from the Department of Finance on access to cash.

When the cost-of-living crisis hit we campaigned for extra pay increases and cost of living payments. Work has to pay, and workers have to be rewarded. We negotiated cost of living payments for our members in each of the main retail banks.

We will enter pay negotiations this year with the clear ambition to significantly raise pay for our members. Starting rates of pay in banking are not sustainable and have to be increased. Staff cannot afford to rent a home never mind buy their own home.

Career progression opportunities need to be clear and transparent.

Colleagues we will campaign together to ensure that staff are rewarded, and that work pays.

That is why you are better with the FSU.

At our last conference we called for a banking forum to be established in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

We achieved both objectives with Minister Conor Murphy establishing banking roundtable discussions in Northern Ireland and the then Minister for Finance in the Republic of Ireland Pascal Donohoe TD announcing a banking review.

We have recently got agreement from the current Minister for Finance in Northern Ireland Caoimhe Archibald that she will reconvene the banking roundtable in Northern Ireland comprising all relevant stakeholders.

We will ensure that the interests of our members are represented in those discussions, and we will work with NGOs who want to retain branch services.

We wholeheartedly welcome the recent statement from Minister Archibald calling on the banks to cease branch closures.

At the last conference we called for the restoration of variable pay in the three main retail banks in the Republic of Ireland.

Since the banking crash these payments had been prohibited. Our members, ordinary bank staff, providing a professional service while suffering financially due to the actions of others.

Our campaign was successful with bank staff receiving variable pay this year for the first time in over a decade.

That is why you are better with the FSU.

Increased maternity pay,

collective bargaining agreed for managers in PTSB and AIB, Northern Ireland,

increased pay awards,

cost of living vouchers,

remote working agreements,

menopause leave,

Training and educational opportunities,

Legal Advice,

Support when you need it,

Some of the other reasons why you are better with the FSU.

Let me now turn to the future.

Our future strategy is ambitious, inclusive and membership focused.

Our ambition is to be a progressive and innovative trade union, recognised for supporting, representing, and enabling members.

Our purpose is to support, enable and empower members to achieve their career ambitions while leading the

development of a sustainable, ethical financial services sector.

Our vision is of an FSU that is at the heart of the financial services community.

We will be at the centre of decision making, influencing the decision-making process, campaigning for better and delivering for our members.

The strategy will be based on four pillars.

Growth

The FSU will invest in growing our membership base through a focus on recruiting new members and retaining existing ones. Last year we recruited 1,300 new members.

Experience

The FSU will provide members with an excellent member experience, Members will be advocates for the FSU, recruiting other members. We are currently engaging with members on their experience with the FSU and their feedback on what more we can do.

Reputation

The FSU will be a trusted voice for its members and a leader in the development of a sustainable and ethical Financial Services Sector.

Organisational

The FSU will successfully implement its strategy and function as an effective, fit for purpose 21st Century Trade union.

We will adapt to ever changing world of work and provide our membership with a fit for purpose membership offering.

We are successful because we have excellent staff working on behalf of members.

We are successful because of the work all of you here today and do on a daily basis.

We are successful because of the activists working on behalf of the union.

I have spoken a little about the challenges of the last couple of years.

I would like to turn now to an issue we will debate in great detail tomorrow.

Collective Bargaining and the right to organise a union in your workplace.

In the last twelve months our fastest growing sector has been the tech sector.

It has been a turbulent time for this sector with redundancy after redundancy announcements and fear and anxiety from workers rampant within the sector.

This was always a sector where retaining workers was the biggest obstacle to growth but suddenly downsizing the workforce has become the norm.

The big difference between this sector and other areas where we represent workers is these companies currently refuse to speak to unions, refuse to accept that workers should be represented by a union and refuse all requests from workers for representation.

But these companies allow themselves to have representation, whether it be IBEC, The American Chamber of Commerce or blue-chip legal firms. This is commonly known as double standards.

They are allowed to get away with it because legislation in the Republic of Ireland is weak.

We know from opinion polls that Irish Workers want unionised workplaces.

An opinion poll has found that 74% of all workers want the legal right to collectively bargain with their employer.

How can the Irish Government continue to ignore this fact.

How can anyone stand over the fact that the Republic of Ireland has some of the weakest workers' rights in Western Europe.

The FSU have come together with our comrades in the CWU, SIPTU and Mandate under the campaign banner, RESPECT AT WORK to expose the bleak reality of many Irish workplaces.

To shed a light on rogue employers who engage in union busting and to fight for respect in the workplace that we all deserve.

We need a worker centric transposition of the EU Directive on Adequate Minimum Wage that includes new legislation that protects workers from discrimination.

That gives everyone the right to access information about their rights to join a trade union.

That allows workers to organise a trade union in their workplace without fear of victimisation.

We hear so much about the needs of business.

It is the workers who keep these businesses in profit.

Show them the respect they deserve.

I would also like to take this opportunity to congratulate ICTU on the BETTER IN A UNION campaign.

Unions coming together to promote the benefits of union membership and combining on events all over the Country sends a strong and necessary signal that the Union movement is renewing and modernising itself to show how your voice is stronger in a Union.

The FSU will proudly play our part organising, supporting, advising, and training our members to be advocates for our union and the wider union movement.

We will show why it is better to be with the FSU.

Can I now take this opportunity to say thank you to our President, Eileen Gorman.

Eileen set ambitious targets and goals when she became President and showed huge determination to ensure she achieved them.

A focus on closing the gender pay gap has led to the FSU campaigning and highlighting this issue at all levels of Government both in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Ensuring that domestic violence, menopause and menstrual health issues were taken seriously by employers and treated as a workplace issue.

We would never have reached agreement with Danske Bank on a domestic violence workplace policy, seen as a template for other employers without the input from Eileen.

We have now agreed these policies with different Banks and are taking a leading role in the stop the stigma campaign.

Ensuring that the FSU is fit for purpose to tackle the challenges of an ever-changing workplace, Eileen led the strategy discussions and has been central to its implementation.

I would like to thank Eileen for her support for me personally and for the FSU. We are in a better place because of the work done by Eileen.

The FSU will continue to organise.

We will organise and recruit in the Banks.

We will continue to campaign on issues that matter.

We will continue to oppose bank branch closures.

Banks cannot continue to withdraw local banking services from communities.

Today we have released the results of a poll by leading research company Ireland Thinks which says that

87% of people feel it is important to have a local bank branch with face-to-face customer service in their local area.

91% of people believe that you should have a choice of banking channel that you use.

and
87% would support a commitment from Banks to maintain current bank branch levels for a period of five years.

Your local bank branch is a critical part of the infrastructure of local communities.

It is somewhere to:

get critical financial advice,

to deposit and access cash,

to talk to someone in person about a car loan, about a mortgage, about some of the most critical financial decisions we take in our lifetime.

That is why the FSU have successfully opposed recent bank branch closures in the Republic of Ireland will do so in Northern Ireland and why we want a moratorium on branch closures for at least a period of five years.

Local Banking services are:

Good for banks

Good for consumers

Good for communities and

Good for staff.

We will continue to fight for better pay.

Work has to pay, and this is why negotiating pay deals with our employers is at the centre of everything we do.

We have a track record of delivering better pay and conditions for our members and we will not apologise for demanding better from employers.

We will continue to support our members.

We will continue to influence legislators.

We will continue to show why you are better with the FSU.

There are new issues that confront us now. These present challenges but also opportunities.

The four-day week.

Remote working.

Surveillance in the workplace.

The emergence of AI.

We will debate these issues over the next few days.

These are all issues that can benefit workers if the proper safeguards are put in place. Change needs to be managed and we will play an active and vocal role in enhancing our members interests and the interests of consumers.

Unions combining and working together make us stronger.

Workers coming together in a common purpose makes us stronger.
Let us use our combined strength to make the workplace a better place.

Let us show why it is better with the FSU.

Thank you.