

Congress opening statement to Oireachtas Committee on Communications, Climate Action & Environment on the Just Transition (Worker and Community Environmental Rights) Bill 2018

Chair and Committee Members,

We welcome the opportunity to engage with your Committee around the broad issue of Just Transition and, more specifically, on the Just Transition (Worker and Community Environmental Rights) Bill 2018.

In doing so we note the proposals contained in the Climate Action Plan (CAP) to help deliver greater policy coherence and action on this critical issue, including:

- the introduction of legally-binding five-year carbon budgets;
- the establishment of a Climate Action Delivery Board, chaired by the Department of the Taoiseach;
- the establishment of a more robust Climate Action Council to advise and monitor government progress in emissions reduction;
- the establishment of a Standing Committee on Climate Action to ensure accountability across all branches of government, and
- ensuring that major state investment decisions will be subject to a carbon impact and mitigation evaluation.

However, from our perspective there is one key element missing from this list: that is, the establishment of an appropriate, overarching structure to help ensure delivery of a Just Transition, in workplaces and communities across the country.

For this reason we welcome the introduction of this Bill by the Green Party and acknowledge their engagement with the trade union movement on its contents.

The Bill proposes to establish a Commission that would bring specialist expertise to bear in respect of transition issues. In last week's hearing before the larger, all-party Committee, we highlighted some of the difficulties currently being experienced in the Midlands.

It is our view that some of those difficulties would almost certainly have been averted and avoided if such legislation had been enacted and the proposed structure was up and running.

As was mentioned at last week's hearing, all successful examples of Just Transition to date demonstrate the necessity for proactive policy action. Indeed, they hinge on state-led advance planning, proactive engagement with all stakeholders and the allocation of appropriate resources.

Unfortunately, in the absence of any such process or overarching plan, the workers in Bord na Móna and the communities of the Midlands have been left without the support or the systems necessary to drive this critical transition process.

As matters stand, they have been asked to sacrifice their livelihoods for the good of future generations and have seen little that is concrete or certain in return.

Change of this magnitude requires 'all of government' action and a strategic, overarching vision – it cannot be left to chance, or to the market.

It is not good enough to simply borrow the language of Just Transition, government and policymakers need to engage on the substance of that concept.

As we understand it, the proposed Bill would see Oireachtas involvement in appointing members of the Board of the Just Transition Commission.

The Board would then have the power to require companies - such as Bord na Móna - to develop a Just Transition plan for their specific enterprise that would encompass key issues such as retraining, reskilling and redeployment.

We note also that the Bill foresees the input of all stakeholders into such plans, a procedure to monitor implementation, and a mediation system to address possible disputes.

These are welcome measures and the overall architecture as outlined in the Bill has the potential to overcome difficulties such as those that have been highlighted, in respect of a company that refuses to engage in the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) facilitated Forum that worker representatives have called for.

In the same vein, it appears somewhat odd that the government should appoint a Just Transition Commissioner and then explicitly rule out that office having any role in industrial relations matters and the difficulties faced by workers, as part of that process.

While Congress support the content and aims of this Bill, the urgency of the situation in the Midlands dictates that we cannot afford to wait while it continues its progress through the Oireachtas.

Therefore, the proposed Workplace Relations Commission forum should be now be utilised to address the issues that have arisen in Bord na Móna, in the absence of any other legislative or institutional vehicle.

Indeed, the WRC may well have a useful role to play in the structures proposed under this Bill.

Earlier this year Congress - in alliance with a range of environmental NGOs - called for the establishment of a properly-resourced national Just Transition Task Force to oversee and drive the transition here, over the coming years.

Our call echoed the recommendation of the Joint Committee contained in the report it published in March of this year.

Whatever model is adopted, the crucial point is that we urgently require an overarching, strategic vision as to where this process leads, a clear roadmap of how we get there and a legislative framework that is equal to the enormous and very pressing challenge that we face.

This should encompass:

- Social dialogue that includes all stakeholders;
- Access to retraining and education; and
- Respect for democratic rights to trade union and community representation.

The workers and communities at the heart of this transition process deserve nothing less.

ENDS