



## **Congress Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community**

**May 2021**

**Irish Congress of Trade Unions  
31/32 Parnell Square  
Dublin 1  
[www.ictu.ie](http://www.ictu.ie)**

## Introduction

Congress is pleased to take up this invitation for myself and my colleague Lisa Connell (Fórsa) to discuss with you today the topic of Traveller employment and labour market participation, having regard to the unemployment rate of 80 per cent among Travellers. Of course, this figure is quoted from prior to the pandemic<sup>1</sup>. Due to an absence of ethnic equality monitoring in the collection of employment and unemployment data, the rate of unemployment among Travellers post-Covid is not known at this stage.

As government supports people back into employment post the pandemic, it is imperative there are positive action measures which ensure that Travellers and other under-represented groups in the labour market are not left behind.

I refer you to our written submission from January this year. It outlines a long history of standing by and supporting Travellers and Traveller organisations. Given the time restraints, I don't intend to go over that ground today.

We stated in our submission that, welcome as it is, the recognition of Traveller ethnicity alone will not deal with the 80% unemployment rate in their community - a statistic underpinned by a range of issues affecting their participation in the labour market. Factors such as severe educational disadvantage, inequality and discrimination in the workplace all contribute to this situation. It is clear that rights must follow, and that an institutionalised policy response is needed to address all of these.

We went on to outline the policy framework including the National Traveller Roma Inclusion Strategy and the shortcomings and limitations of NTRIS both in terms of its own programme and on targets in relation to Traveller employment and enterprise. We participated in the St Stephen's Green Trust Traveller Enterprise and Employment Policy Programme and believe the project has had a significant input and that the findings in relation to employment are a lasting legacy for this work. They include:

- The need for national strategies underpinning growth, recovery, employment and enterprise to name Travellers as a target group.

---

<sup>1</sup> Census 2016

- Strong encouragement for the incorporation of the Census question on ethnicity into the work of all statutory bodies and programmes as a means of gathering data on participation.
- Positive action measures to increase supports for Travellers into enterprise and employment.
- Consultation with Traveller organisations is key to developing appropriate and accessible programmes.
- Need for all measures to include monitoring, evaluation and learning frameworks which capture the impact on Travellers.
- Positive actions measures should be gender-proofed in relation to Traveller women.
- Lessons from the Public Sector Duty and the Diversity and Inclusion Strategy of the Public Appointments Service to model the changes that are being sought in the private sector.

Congress furthermore believes that investment in workplace integration can help to make our workplaces effective role models for wider society. Back in 2006, in the context of the National Action Plan on Racism, we worked with the Equality Authority, Ibec and other partners to develop the concept of the integrated workplace.

Integrated workplaces are:

- free from discrimination and harassment;
- welcoming to all migrant workers and other Black and minority ethnic groups including Traveller employees and customers or service users;
- acknowledge and provide for cultural and linguistic diversity among employees and customers as well as making adjustments for diversity among all migrant workers and other Black and minority ethnic employees;

- take practical steps (including workplace anti-racism training) in order to achieve full equality in practice for all migrant workers and other Black and minority ethnic employees;
- communicate a message promoting greater equality within the wider culturally diverse community served by the business.

It is therefore timely that we are now (along with Ibex and the IHREC) seeking to revive this work in the hope of contributing towards securing better employment outcomes for excluded groups, including Travellers.

Our General Secretary, Patricia King, also participates in the Anti-Racism Committee that will make recommendations to Government on how best to strengthen its approach to tackling racism. Its work will culminate in a draft national action plan against racism for consideration by Government.

And this renewed focus is all the more timely following the recent publication of SSGT research **“Travellers in the Mainstream Labour Market: Situation, Experience, and Identity”** which looks at and explores the experiences of Travellers who, despite many barriers, have successfully negotiated a pathway into mainstream employment. The research findings in three areas, namely, getting work-ready, getting into employment, and experiences in development and progression while in work. We read with interest your own recent engagement with two of the authors - Rachel Mullen, and Niall Crowley at your last session and note that key barriers that emerged were discrimination at the point of recruitment, as well as forms of harassment in the workplace, not being comfortable with being open about one's ethnic identity in the workplace and not being afforded opportunities to progress. Some people felt this was directly because of their Traveller identity.

The research also reinforces the critical need for Travellers to be named in mainstream labour market policies and that the key policy in this regard would be the new Pathways to Work strategy being developed in DSP. A useful and timely recommendation along these lines from your work would be very welcome and arising out of that naming, specific targeted measures to address the significant unemployment gap.

Underpinning this policy strategy should be the more effective implementation of the public sector equality and human rights duty, and Congress and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) co-hosted a webinar on "The Potential of the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty for Trade Unions" late last year to better inform our work.

We also agree that a systemic work experience programme across the public sector that would have internships specifically targeting groups that are very distanced from the labour market such as Travellers is important.

The last recommendation involves the importance of guidance and supports for employers and trade unions, an acknowledgment of our key role in respect of employment pathways for the Traveller community.

One of the key elements emerging from the research was the importance of workplace cultures that allowed people to reconcile work and family life, obviously crucial for access, particularly for Traveller women, but also quite clearly for men also. Congress has been working tirelessly in this regard, seeking the effective transposition of the EU Work Life Balance Directive and advocating for workers rights to request flexible working arrangements.

The personal accounts in this seminal report will hopefully inform the development of policy and actions to address the challenges experienced by Travellers. Trade unions will not be found wanting in terms of continuing our work with the Traveller community to achieve better outcomes.

Thanks for the opportunity to participate and Congress wishes you well in your work.

ENDS