



Opening Statement by SIPTU RE: Rural Social Scheme and TÚS Initiative

Ref: JSPCRDI-i-26

Introduction

Thank you for your invitation, Chair and the opportunity to address the Committee here this morning. SIPTU represents the 400 plus supervisors employed in both TÚS and the Rural Social Schemes (RSS). Our members provide an invaluable service to local communities in ensuring an effective and professional approach to community employment and social inclusion.

In our submission we have given an overview of the current services and the structural changes needed which we believe would greatly enhance the services. (These issues have been addressed also in the opening statements and submissions by the other contributors here today).

We will in our opening statement therefore concentrate on the industrial relations framework or lack thereof and outline some of the most pressing industrial relations issues which we believe your committee may be in a position to offer some assistance in addressing.

Industrial Relations Framework

Collective Bargaining

Our members employed as TÚS and RSS supervisors suffer the same fate as most workers employed across the Community Sector. They are employees of private companies, typically Partnerships and Local Development Companies. The funding for their salaries, however, comes directly from Government spending. In this case from the Department of Social Protection. Our members have not had a pay increase for a significant number of years. As a trade union, representing this cohort of workers, we find ourselves in a very frustrating position. Employers are, in the main, willing to engage with us, however, they do not have any funds to meet our claims, be that in respect of pay claims, pension provision, sick pay, maternity leave etc. The Department of Social Protection's stock response is that it is not the employer. We recently have concluded negotiations with the Department in respect of a Labour Court Recommendation outstanding since 2008 for community employment

supervisors concerning pension provision. While we reached agreement in respect of a pension gratuity it still has not to date been paid.

We note that the EU will soon implement a directive concerning minimum rates of pay and collective bargaining coverage. It will soon be incumbent on all member states to increase their collective bargaining coverage to 80% of their national workforces. If the Government intends to give effect to this directive where better to start than in the community sector, the near abroad of the public sector. I want to stress that our members do not have any great desire to become public servants *per se*, but they do expect that their terms and conditions of employment to be fair and reach a threshold of decency.

This limbo type situation that trade unions representing workers in the community sector find themselves must come to an end. There were mechanisms in place before which provided for a more normal industrial relations environment. Between 1986 and 2008, for example, our members in TÚS and RSS would have received pay increases which mirrored the pay provisions of the social partnership agreements. We have outlined below some of the most pertinent issues which remain outstanding because of the lack of an effective collective bargaining forum for all stakeholders to attend, namely the Department, the ILDN and trade unions.

We had most lately, on Feb 23, requested that the Department of Social Protection re-establish a tripartite forum which had been in place since 2017 (comprised of representatives from the Department, ILDN and trade unions). We believe that this was an important body. We still believe that the re-establishment of such a body would be critical to building relationships between the relevant stake holders.

Pay Claim

RSS and TÚS play a critical role in promoting social inclusion in both rural and urban settings. It is our firm belief that the roles have evolved in respect of RSS and TUS supervisors in recent years to such an extent that the 15% differential which exists between the CES supervisors' rate of pay and RSS and TUS supervisors is neither justifiable nor sustainable. We have approached the Department of Social Protection, accordingly, seeking the establishment of an evaluation exercise of the role and duties which these workers are now undertaking. The purpose of the evaluation exercise would be to conduct a comparative analysis between the role and duties of CES supervisors' vis a vis RSS and TUS supervisors. The rate of the additional payment for co-ordinating supervisors needs also to be the subject of this evaluation exercise. This is the only objective and fair way in which to validate the basis for our claim. We have sought to agree terms of reference and the methodology for the conduct of this evaluation exercise. The Department informed the unions at our only meeting with officials with the Department in recent times that they would need to liaise with officials from the Department of Public Enterprise and Reform in respect of same. It should be noted that the conduct of an evaluation of the work and roles of a grade of employees is a normal process to adopt within the public sector where a union believes that there is merit in a regrading exercise. We would ask the committee to use its significant influence to assist SIPTU and these workers in advancing this request.

Pension Scheme

As you are probably aware our members have no occupational pension scheme. This is, quite frankly, intolerable. The standard defence by the Department that it is not the employer is a tired refrain and a fig leaf of a defence which simply does not wash with our members. We have sought the immediate introduction of an occupational pension scheme. We have not been prescriptive in our demands and are amenable to discussions around pension model and contribution levels.

Worker Voice

We believe that workers should be included in the whatever stakeholder bodies that currently exist. As it stands SIPTU has no input into the current review of RSS.

Travel Expenses

There is currently a structural problem in the payment of travel expenses for members employed in RSS. There is an effective cap on travel expenses for RSS supervisors. This is the cause of much frustration for our members and immediate remedial measures to address same would be welcomed. Schemes need to be funded to a sufficient degree which does not see our members out of pocket.

6-Year Rule

This issue has been referred to by previous speakers. We believe that the current rule in respect of RSS is undermining the viability of the scheme's primary function namely the promotion of social inclusion. We would again ask the committee to reflect on the 6 -year rule and recommend the elimination of same.

Conclusion

The present situation where trade unions are being sent from pillar to post, i.e. from department to employer is not and never was tenable. Last week hundreds of Community Sector workers took to the street they have not received a pay increase in over 14 years. This is simply no longer tolerable. Our members need a pay rise. An effective collective bargaining forum needs to be established which addresses this and the other issues I have referred to above. The dysfunctional nature of industrial relations which prevails across the community sector also needs urgently to be addressed.

