

Terry Carling, Northern Ireland Officer of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions - "It is the best thing for investment since the sliced loaf"

18 June 1998

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) has members throughout Ireland. It was one of the most vociferous supporters of the 'Yes' campaign in the May 22 referendums on the Northern Ireland agreement.

In the South, the ICTU has signed up to a series of agreements with government and big business since the 1988 'Programme for National Recovery'. The most recent is 'Partnership 2000'. Under these accords, the unions have played a key role in creating the conditions for expanding profits for the transnational corporations investing in Ireland, first by holding down wages, and second by suppressing strikes and other manifestations of opposition in the working class

The ICTU seeks to play the same corporatist role in the North, where it has a membership of almost 200,000 in 33 unions. Alongside the multiparty talks that secured the agreement, a 'Political and Economic Group' (PEG) was established. This comprised the parties at the talks, together with the ICTU and employers' organisations such as the Confederation of British Industry, the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Northern Ireland Economic Council and the Institute of Directors.

RT: What is the position of the ICTU on the Agreement?

TC: The ICTU is urging a 'Yes' vote for peace. We welcome the fact that there are social and human rights issues enshrined in the heart of the Agreement. This is part of our Investing in Peace Programme that we launched last year. From many a platform, for many a year, we have shouted at politicians to come to some kind of agreement. They've done it and we thought it was appropriate to respond in kind. We recognise that there will be individual trade unionists that will take different views, but we are confident that there will be a

'Yes' vote.

RT: What is the ICTU's position on the Agreement's division of the working class into so-called unionist and nationalist communities?

TC: We want to see an end to that eventually, but you need people to start talking together before you can get to that idealistic situation. We have had some good experience in the last few years in working with councillors of different denominations in the European Peace Programme. We had the Provisional IRA and the Democratic Unionist Party (the main party opposing the Agreement for its 'concessions' to Irish nationalism--editor) working together with us, along with business and the voluntary sector.

That gives us hope for what can happen in the future. If you look back to 1974, to the power-sharing executive, the problem was not with the relationships between the ministers of the different parties, it was the outsiders who wrecked it. There were some excellent examples of co-operation between political parties and we would have liked to see that continue.

RT: How do you see the 'Yes' vote in terms of investment in Northern Ireland?

TC: It is the best thing for investment since the sliced loaf. I know of one company that is sitting on an investment project for Northern Ireland and is waiting to see the outcome of today's results. In June there is a trade mission of 18 American companies, led by the American Secretary of Trade. Two years ago there wasn't a hope in hell of us getting that kind of high-power trade mission. If there was a 'No' vote I am sure that quite a lot of them would just say, 'Forget it!'

RT: Do you see investment by these companies leading to an improvement in the conditions of the workers?

TC: Yes, because one of the target groups that we have identified in our Investing in Peace Programme has been the long-term unemployed. Some £315 million has been invested and a fair bit of it is aimed at the long-term unemployed, developing skills, etc. It is a very positive programme. We are represented on the board of the Youth Training Agency. We work directly with individual companies to develop training packages that fit the labour supply to their demands. We advocate that the Training Agency should develop such programmes to give people in deprived areas opportunities for jobs.

RT: Does trade union membership cut across the border and the divide between Protestant and Catholic?

TC: We are cross-border and cross-community. The ICTU represents members throughout the whole of Ireland and our central authority is actually the Executive Council, which meets in Dublin. We also represent across the community divide, though there are exceptions such as in teaching because of the existence of denominational schools.

RT: How do the unions see their role in safeguarding the conditions of workers in any company that invests in Ireland?

TC: By and large we have had good industrial relations--the number of days lost, disputes and so on is small. In the last six years I have only been involved in one major industrial dispute with a private sector company, a foreign company. When it doesn't get to that level, it shows the unions are dealing with things. It was a very bitter dispute, but eventually we got a resolution to it.

RT: Which one was that?

TC: I am not sure I want to be quoted on that.

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