

ASTI Annual Convention 2024

Address by

ASTI General Secretary Kieran Christie

Wednesday April 3rd 2024

Check against delivery

Thank you, President. I would just like to start by joining with so many in congratulating you, President, on the excellent address to Convention that you provided yesterday. It was forceful, clear, and incisive on all the issues of concern to our members. I say well done and thank you. Coming as it did after your contribution to that very poignant tribute to our Immediate Past President, the late Miriam Duggan, was a very difficult ask but you rose majestically to the occasion. And on that, of course I and indeed all the staff of ASTI would wish to be associated with that tribute to Miriam. Aside from being a wonderful President and activist within the ASTI, Miriam was a personal friend of mine for well over twenty years. We miss her greatly.

I also want to express my congratulations to Donal Cremin in becoming President Elect of the Association. Donal will serve with distinction. I am very much looking forward to working with him.

I want to congratulate Pdraig Curley on being elected Vice President. He is a strong and committed ASTI activist. Along with our Honorary Treasurer, Pdraig Murphy, who is also returning to his position, and my congratulations to you too Pdraig, we have assembled a formidable team of officers. I look forward to working with them for the coming year.

Convention, for this report I have as usual stripped out some central issues from among the several reports you have before you over this convention. Many of the issues I will address will also be debated as motions throughout the week. I am not sure that I will live up to the best advice that I have ever heard regarding public speaking: be brief, be bright – be gone, but I will do my best.

Convention, as you know, ASTI members voted in recent weeks to accept the terms of the new Public Service Agreement 2024 – 2026.

The outcome was as follows:

8,886 members voted for acceptance of the proposals or 85% of the valid poll.

1,589 members or 15% of the valid poll voted against.

The turnout of ballot was 55.5%

It has now been also ratified and accepted by the Public Services Committee of the ICTU.

I don't propose to rehash here the terms of the agreement – you are all very familiar with those. But I do want to acknowledge that once again, ASTI was to

the forefront in agitating for the retention of pension parity for our retired members. They deserve no less.

I also wish to draw a few of the key threads together.

As you know, the Government has agreed to repeal the remnants of FEMPI legislation, the provisions that give the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery and Reform so much power to reject union claims not provided for in National Agreements and frustrates agreed dispute resolution processes. It is to be hoped that the days of DPER saying No, No, No, to pretty much everything that is brought forward are coming to an end.

As you know, the agreement is for 30 months – from 1st January 2024 to 30th June 2026.

As I said, I am not going to rehash the pay elements, the pension parity elements, or the no strike clause and so on here, you know all that, I want to address the programme of work that opens up now that it has been agreed.

You will know that Chapter 4 of the agreement provides for local bargaining. Employers and trade unions may negotiate additional changes in rates of pay

and/or conditions of employment up to a maximum of 3% of the basic pay cost, inclusive of allowances in the nature of pay, of the particular grade, group or category of employee or bargaining unit. This may include proposals involving changes in structures, work practices or other conditions of service.

Detailed arrangements for local bargaining units will be agreed by the parties by 30 June 2024.

Local negotiations within sectors concerning proposals will take place between July 2024 and June 2025. The parties will endeavour, to the greatest extent possible, to reach agreement through direct negotiation.

Where agreement cannot be reached and local engagement has been fully exhausted, the matters of disagreement will proceed, for teachers, to the Teachers' Conciliation Council and its arbitration mechanism if necessary.

Implementation of adjustments will be on a phased basis. The first instalment, equivalent to 1% of the basic pay cost, will be implemented on 1st September 2025 and the balance will fall to be addressed in any successor pay agreement.

I have previously stated to our Central Executive Council that there are known unknowns here, unknowns that won't be fully resolved until we get to the point of negotiating the process.

We know that the first instalment, equivalent to 1% of the basic pay cost, will be implemented on 1st September 2025 and the balance of a further 2% of the basic pay cost will fall to be addressed in any successor pay agreement.

The fund is available on a use it or lose it basis.

We are not sure what issues it might be possible to use it for – we will not know that until the process is set up and the bargaining begins.

But I will say this.

I know that in terms of productivity- teachers simply have no more to give. We are in for interesting times.

Organisation

Convention, turning towards our own organisation, in your Convention reports this year a healthy increase in the membership numbers of the ASTI is reported. There are a variety of factors that have fed into that. I have often stated previously that the most important cogs in the wheels of our organisation are our school stewards. I want to pay tribute to each and every one of them because they are the primary recruiters in our organisation and as such are our lifeblood in many ways. I also want to pay tribute to the work of our branch and regional organisers and the leadership provided to them by our Honorary National Organiser, Michael McGrath. Standing Committee and many others including our superb staff in ASTI have also played a major role.

And I suppose it is important to reflect on the wider context too.

Many of you will have seen that ICTU launched a nationwide Trade Union Awareness PR Campaign called '*Better in a Trade Union*' this year following on from motions and requests over many years that they mount such a campaign from ASTI among others.

The intention is to initiate an integrated campaign that deploys across in-person events, branded materials, press and media engagement through to paid social media and digital video advertising.

The campaign is designed to build a public and social consensus while supplementing and supporting co-ordinated workplace-level recruitment activity by individual unions.

The campaign culminates in the first week of May with Union Week. All affiliates are being urged to hold events that week to highlight the value and work of their union, not just for their own members but for society as a whole. In an ever-changing workplace landscape that message could not be more timely.

ASTI TUI Unity discussions

As you know, I reported last year, ASTI and TUI have opened discussions on the prospect of achieving teacher unity by way of amalgamating our two unions. For decades, this has been an objective of both Unions but has proved elusive

for a variety of reasons. You heard the joint statement of the two Presidents of the two unions a little earlier.

ASTI is engaging in the discussions in good faith and in the context that both parties agree that there are no preconditions.

Scoping discussions on the issue commenced in December 2022 and for most of last year we had very little to report. All that has been done was to try to list the synergies that would flow from unity and barriers that would have to be overcome if a proposal is to advance.

I assured you previously that if a proposal was developed, it will require comprehensive and substantial membership consultation within both unions. I stated that on the chances of success, who knows, but that you would be kept abreast of any developments as they happen.

On 7th November 2023, the Presidents of the ASTI and the TUI issued a statement and I will requote the key excerpts:

Over the past 12 months the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI) and the Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI) have been engaging in

extensive discussions around the prospect of unification. We have held several meetings including four, so far, this academic year. Both unions have engaged constructively and in good faith. We have examined both unions' rule books and a potential structure for a new education union. There remains a considerable amount of work to be done.

The aim is to create a new union that at its heart is member focused. It must both acknowledge and respect the traditions of each union, while also creating a new union that is able to face the challenges of today's industrial relations landscape.

The merging of two large unions is not a simple process and whilst a definitive deadline for the end of these discussions is impossible to predict, at the current pace, it is hoped to have an outcome that can be presented to the executive structures and the membership of TUI and ASTI within the 2023/24 academic year.

Any outcome that emerges from these discussions will require comprehensive and substantial membership consultation within both unions and will ultimately be adjudicated upon in ballots of members.

That statement was signed by David Waters, President, TUI / Geraldine O'Brien, President, ASTI

The truth is that progress has been fairly slow. Both sides are anxious not to rush. However, we have now agreed with the TUI to issue a joint survey of members of ASTI and TUI with a view to gauging members' opinion in both unions regarding the prospect of amalgamation.

Members will be asked for their views in a context whereby the potential exists to create a new union that must both acknowledge and respect the traditions of each Union, while also creating a new Union that is able to face the challenges of today's industrial relations landscape.

It will acknowledge that any outcome that emerges from the on-going discussions will require comprehensive and substantial membership consultation within both unions and will ultimately be decided upon in ballots of members.

The purpose of the brief survey will be to gauge the opinion of members from both unions around the possibility of unification.

So, as you can see, it can only proceed on a basis that every member can see themselves being accommodated and that a new structure will respect the traditional decision-making processes of both the ASTI and the TUI.

If we get a sense that members feel the work should continue then we will do that. If we get the sense that there is no appetite for this then we will discontinue the process.

We just want to check in with the members to get a steer on what they want and how they feel. Ultimately, it is their union and their wishes must be respected.

Leaving Certificate Redevelopment

Convention, there is no doubt that one issue that has stayed at the very top of our priorities this school year is the Minister for Education's plans for Senior Cycle redevelopment which she announced on 29th March, 2022. While, following pressure from the ASTI, we welcomed her retention of existing subjects and indeed Transition Year, it was clear that there was a series of mountains to be climbed to panel beat it into something workable from our perspective and the perspective of the students we teach.

We have consistently made the point that it is essential that the mistakes made in the introduction of the Framework for Junior Cycle, which side-lined the voice of teachers, must not be repeated.

Further, key developments have taken place since that Ministerial announcement and it might be useful to briefly take stock.

It is longstanding ASTI policy that state examinations for certification purposes are entirely externally assessed and this must be retained in all aspects of the development of the Leaving Certificate. From that perspective, the standout measure in Minister Foley's initial plan was to change the final assessment procedure to significantly reduce reliance on final examinations and introduce teacher-based assessment components. The ASTI pointed out from the get go that Senior Cycle change must protect the integrity of the examinations and must be built upon fairness for students and trust in the system. We clearly identified and left no one in any doubt that it was and is a red line issue for us. We immediately mounted a vigorous campaign to secure this crucial change to the plan. We organised a number of events and initiatives which included a series of public and private events in conjunction with the Teachers' Union of

Ireland. Key motions were adopted at Annual Conventions 2022 and 2023 together with several others adopted by our Central Executive Council.

This led to an announcement by Minister Foley on 20th September, 2023 that she was accelerating the development of new and revised specifications in nine subjects together with work to develop externally assessed components in each subject that are not a traditional written examination. She stated she was conscious of the more recent accelerated evolution and growth in generative AI and that she had asked the State Exams Commission that further research would be commissioned on the potential role and impact of generative artificial intelligence in teacher-based assessment. While this work is ongoing, she has decided to progress additional and practical components that will be externally assessed by the SEC.

By taking the concept of teacher-based assessment off the table, the prospect of fairness for all - teachers and students - and trust in the examinations system was opened up.

That development, coming on top of the Minister's row-back in February 2023 on her proposed plans for students to sit Leaving Certificate Paper 1 in both English and Irish at the end of fifth year were major advances that show how

decisive and co-ordinated action works. On that matter we worked hard with our colleagues in TUI and with others. For instance, we issued a joint Press Release with the An Gréasán and INOTE in February 2023. It is important that we continue with this approach.

Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations

However, we are still not where we want to be on the Leaving Certificate Oral Examinations. Following strong representations by the ASTI, the Music Practical Performance Tests were returned to within school term for Leaving Certificate 2023. It was clear that the move to hold them in 2022 during the Easter break simply did not work. Reversion to the practice that prevailed previously regarding that subject is a sound decision.

However, it is regrettable that the ASTI demand that the Oral Examinations also be returned to within school term has not been met. This is neither a sound educational or logistical decision. Students were again this year enormously and intensively stretched to perform across a range of subjects over a tight timeframe.

ASTI was assured by the State Examinations Commission that holding the Oral examinations at Easter in 2023 did not indicate the timing of these tests in

perpetuity. The SEC stated that the holding of these examinations at Easter in 2023 was to allow for a comprehensive evaluation of the arrangements outside of the context of Covid.

Unfortunately, in December 2023, ASTI was advised that while the SEC had intended to have all of the evaluation work completed at an earlier point in time, in order to allow for in-depth consideration of the range of issues by the Board and Executive of the State Examinations Commission before providing advice to the Minister on the future timing, it had not been possible to complete the evaluation in a timeframe that allowed for consideration without delaying important decisions on the 2024 examinations.

Accordingly, the 2024 Leaving Certificate Oral examinations were delivered last week as I already mentioned. We will continue to press hard on this issue for next year.

Subject Redevelopment

As already stated, the September 20th 2023 announcement by the Minister for Education Norma Foley revised a key pillar of her proposals for Senior Cycle

redevelopment. In tandem with this, she also announced an accelerated process of redevelopment of Senior Cycle curriculum using her Tranche 1 and Tranche 2 and indeed later tranches model.

The ASTI encouraged its members to engage with public consultations via the NCCA website and other mechanisms.

The ASTI has nominated two ASTI representatives per NCCA Development Group. ASTI representatives work hard to ensure that ASTI policies are brought to the fore at Subject Development Group meetings and during decision-making processes. They also work closely with their TUI colleagues and any other allies they find at their respective tables. Today, I want to publicly thank them all for their valuable work on our behalf.

Indeed, since the announcement by the Minister for Education of 29th March, 2022, ASTI has worked closely with the TUI on a joint approach of opposition to elements of the proposals. A key element of this has been the joint hosting of seminars for activists and subject representatives. The first of these was held in Athlone on Saturday 26th November 2022, and was entitled 'Equity and Excellence for All'. A second seminar was held on 14th October 2023. It is important that the two unions continue to collaborate on the wider ongoing programme for senior cycle change. The aim remains to develop common

understandings and common approaches to the suite of actions proposed in the Minister's plan. A lot of important collaborative work has been done by the two unions and to advance the terms of the joint position adopted last year at both the ASTI Annual Convention and the TUI Annual Congress which set out in detail our requirements regarding subject specifications and accompanying documentation that underpin the changes to/for introduction of syllabi.

A non-exhaustive list of things that must be comprehensively addressed include workload, timetabling, professional time, CPD, communications, resources, and assessment practices. Decisions on breadth of content and depth of treatment will have to be made and crucially, viable subjects need to emerge.

The minimum 60/40 breakdown must go in some subjects. Our members' expertise and the wider scientific community expertise regarding subjects in the sciences in particular must be listened to in that regard. Teachers are at the pin of their collar regarding workload. Class sizes and class contact time, old perennials as bugbears at ASTI Conventions must be addressed. Put simply, investment is required. The lack of recognition of the immense change that teachers already embraced and implemented must be acknowledged and

rewarded. Silent gratitude is not much use to anyone. There will be no sense of meaningful partnership if this does not happen.

Convention, we are now at a juncture that, for teachers and those like me who have the privilege of leadership, it comes around only once in a lifetime.

I love the old Ruskin quote –

Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you.

And not to forget our own Seamus Heaney –

If we winter this one out, we can summer anywhere.

Colleagues, we need to make sure that the ultimate outcome of all this will be to everyone's benefit.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention Crisis

The teacher recruitment and retention crisis is ensuring that schools are under enormous strain and are barely able to cope.

Hundreds of unfilled post-primary teaching posts are advertised on the education recruitment website educationposts.ie. every week. I looked one day last week and there were in excess of 600 posts advertised.

A RED C/ ASTI survey published last year painted a grim picture, with school leaders reporting in their droves that they had received no applications for an advertised teaching post and that there were unfilled teaching vacancies in many schools. Recent research we have undertaken confirms that the problem is getting worse.

The Minister for Education is failing to deal with the problem as it should be dealt with. She has done little to induce teachers back from countries such as the United Arab Emirates, whereby upon return, they currently must recommence their careers at an inferior point on the teachers' pay scale, irrespective of their experience.

This position, in addition to the Minister's failure to address the fact that such teachers are normally obliged to return to part-time or fixed-term positions, often for years after their return, exacerbates the problem.

Her determination to maintain the extraordinary casualisation of teachers' employment status in their early years is unacceptable. This must change

whereby, subject to satisfactory probation, permanent appointments are made available to one and all, whether just qualified in this country or returning from abroad, and successful applicants are placed on a point on the teachers' pay scale that properly reflects their experience.

The excessive length of pre-teacher training for graduates is no longer viable too. The two-year PME must go.

Shortening of the extraordinarily long teachers' pay scale and doubling the number of middle management posts in schools would help in no small way too.

We need the Minister to change her course and take meaningful measures that will restore and enhance the attractiveness of teaching as a profession in Ireland.

The truth is that the Minister and her Department, together with the Department of Expenditure and Reform, have still not shook off the austerity straitjacket and mindset that inflicted such damage on our schooling system. It seems like they just can't get beyond it.

And as Einstein said, - problems cannot be solved with the same mindset that created them.

Convention, you do not need me to tell you that the impacts of this situation are very real. Schools continue to be forced to reassign Special Education Needs teachers to mainstream classes. Almost a fifth of schools have been forced to remove a subject/subjects from the curriculum. Continuing to rely on measures that have clearly have not worked is not an option.

The lack of appropriate investment in the system and the mention of Special Education Needs teachers reminds me also of something else that is happening and important. Circular 0008/2024 was issued earlier this year and it states that the establishment of additional special classes at post-primary level is a key priority for the National Council for Special Education and the Department of Education. It goes on to say that all post-primary schools can, on average, expect to have around four special classes over the coming years.

The Department of Education will also in coming months issue to schools, revised procedures across three of the most challenging areas for school leaders and teachers, namely:

- Revised Anti-Bullying Procedures to replace the 2013 procedures
- Revised Child Protection and Safeguarding Procedures to replace the 2017 procedures
- Revised Guidelines for Code of Behaviour to replace the 2008 guidelines

Each of these whole-school policy frameworks have a statutory basis and, as such, have a heightened importance for teachers, school leadership and Boards of Management. ASTI is calling on the Department to enable schools to provide for proper resources and planning days to ensure that these policies are given due attention and staff are trained to implement the new procedures.

I again ask the questions, where is the plan to deal with all this, where and when will the CPD be provided and indeed when will adequate resourcing be provided for what's currently happening – never mind the considerable expansion that is being flagged there and into the future.

The failure to properly rebuild the middle management structure in schools that was effectively dismantled during the economic crash is another case in point. Our system is nothing more than a patchwork quilt of stop-gap solutions.

Convention, Elections are coming, and wouldn't it be great if for once, parties of government would pledge to lift us off the bottom of the table of OECD countries when it comes to investment in education as a percentage of GDP. History and research demonstrate that investment in education pays off for

individuals and societies. Indeed, many of today's social ills would be lessened by investment in education.

Convention, last week we released the details of our annual pre-convention survey which this year, focused on Digital Technology and its impact on Teachers' Working Lives. The research objective was to look at the multiple impacts of digital technology on teachers' working lives – inside and outside the classroom. Teachers' rating of the adequacy of the digital infrastructure in their school was mainly in the category of 'fair' to 'poor'. When it comes to AI, teachers' responses were both curious and cautious. 88% want to know more about AI generally. 91% want to know more about how AI is used in education. At the same time, more than 80% have ethical concerns about AI and about data harvesting. The survey also looked at work-related cyberbullying. 18% of our members have been subjected to cyber bullying. That is a shocking statistic. Another shocker is the fact that only 21% of our members say they have a Right to Disconnect policy in their school. There is a whole treasure trove of very useful information in the survey that we can mine in the time to come in seeking to advance our members' interests. The detail of the survey is well worth a look and it is on our website.

And as you will know from previous reports I have presented to Convention; it is the quotes from respondents that provide the richest of testimony.

Regarding the cyberbullying issue, teachers who have experienced it, reported how it made them scared, nervous, and embarrassed, how it was debilitating and affected their confidence as a teacher. Those comments made for difficult reading. And indeed, the area of workload loomed large too.

One teacher wrote, “I end up doing so much work that I feel that I don’t do anything well anymore ... it eats into the soul and is demoralising and reductive.”

Another said, “The Department needs to work to create better working conditions for teachers. We are haemorrhaging young teachers and this is negatively impacting teachers who stay in the profession.”

I couldn’t have put it better myself.

Convention, I have said it before and I will say it again. Teachers never look for much beyond the means to do their job effectively and professionally. It's simple.

Karl Marx argued that the best way to proceed when faced with a difficulty is to rub together conceptual blocks in such a way that they catch fire. ASTI has never been short of progressive ideas and never has been short of the moral courage necessary to bring them forward or engage with them. Whether it's the redevelopment of the Leaving Certificate, the Public Service Agreement, the organisational challenges or any of the other challenges I have ranged across over the duration of this address to Convention, I am reminded of the words of John F Kennedy – Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate.

Colleagues the future is bright.

Ní neart go cur le Chéile – Strength in Unity I say

Thank you.