

Speech by SIPTU General President, Jack O'Connor, to mark the anniversary of the death of James Larkin in 1947, at Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin, on 31st January, 2015

“We are here today to commemorate the memory of Jim Larkin, socialist visionary, working class leader and founder of our trade union. We are doing so on the onset of a year which will turn a new chapter in the history of Ireland and of Europe.

Here in this jurisdiction we are back on the offensive to begin retrieving the ground lost during the period which followed the implosion of the credit fuelled property bubble and the great collapse of the capitalist economic system globally, in 2008. We will be emerging from the difficult compromises that we had to make in the industrial and the political arena in face of the most savage assault on working people since the 1930s.

All of these, from the protocol with the employers in the private sector through the Croke Park and Haddington Road Agreements in the public sector and the call on Labour to step into hell in the current coalition to head off the threat of a single party Fine Gael government, or worse, were elements of a rear-guard strategy designed to hold as much ground as we could in the face of overwhelming odds.

We adopted it in order to limit the outsourcing of jobs on an industrial scale, to maintain the basic integrity of our social welfare system and key public

services, to forestall the wholesale sell-off of our critically important public enterprises at bargain basement prices, to protect the right to organise and to prevent the abolition of the legislative mechanisms that serve as the threshold of decency for pay and terms of employment in our economy. This was the correct course at a time when the State budget deficit was the highest in all of Europe, higher even than that of Greece.

But now in the light of improving economic conditions we are embarking on a major campaign targeting pay increases of 5% across the economy. Meanwhile, we will soon be confronting exploitation in a new battle to establish a minimum living wage of €11.45 an hour across all those sectors of the economy where the gross exploitation of vulnerable workers is the order of the day. In parallel with all of this we are preparing a national campaign to apply pressure on the Government to commence the task of abolishing the Universal Social Charge and replacing it with a new mechanism which will be equally efficient as a means of raising revenue from the better off while removing the burden on those on low to middle incomes.

Apart from the critical role of this agenda in terms of rebuilding the living standards of working people and combatting inequality in our society, putting money in peoples' pockets will also fuel consumption reinforcing the momentum of job creation and recovery.

In the wider European context, we enthusiastically welcome the dramatic victory of Syriza in Greece last Sunday, which signals the beginning of the end

of the nightmare of the one-sided austerity experiment, which has bedevilled the peoples of Europe and threatens the future of the democratic system itself. The intellectual case for one-sided austerity is utterly redundant. It didn't work in theory and now we know, at horrendous cost, that it doesn't work in practice either. The experiment has been tried and failed spectacularly. That analysis is no longer restricted to those on the Left but is clearly evident across the mainstream of the political spectrum.

It has been demonstrated by the European's Central Bank's major quantitative easing initiative, which, while offering the prospect of stalling a total collapse, will not succeed in the absence of a parallel fiscal initiative to stimulate aggregate demand across the continent.

In this regard, we emphatically support Syriza's call for a Debt Conference. They are promoting a sophisticated formula for the warehousing of debt by the ECB, which is being crudely misrepresented as a simplistic demand that their liabilities be written off. The course they are promoting would facilitate the release of hundreds of billions of euro to ramp up the Juncker Plan to the level demanded by the European Trade Union Congress in their imaginative call for another "Marshall Plan". This could provide the resources to conclude a new settlement between Capital and Labour in every stressed country, entailing a trade -off between major fiscal initiatives to promote job creation and growth on the one hand and reforms in employment policy on the other, underpinned by a progressive system of flexicurity. This new concordat would replicate the great

post war settlement, which resulted in more than a generation of unprecedented and consistent economic growth, raising living standards in Western Europe to a greater degree than had ever been experienced before over a similar timeframe in recorded history.

This is the civilised sustainable alternative to the barbarically brutal assault on organised labour and essential public services which is inherent in the one sided austerity formula and which continues to be driven by Germany and those at the top of the financial system in the creditor countries.

Their approach is only a recipe for catastrophic confrontation, the exponential growth of xenophobic racism and the political right and the ultimate demise of the euro and the European project itself.

Dramatic possibilities are now opening up here in Ireland as we approach the centenary of the 1916 Rising. At this extraordinary juncture, history is presenting a ‘once in a century’ opportunity to reassert the egalitarian ideals of the 1916 Proclamation which were suffocated in the counter-revolution which followed the foundation of the State. It is incumbent upon all of us Social Democrats, Left Republicans and Independent Socialists who are inspired by the egalitarian ideals of Jim Larkin and James Connolly to set aside sectarian divisions and develop a political project aimed at winning the next general election on a common platform, let’s call it ‘**Charter 2016**’. This would entail the most difficult and challenging intellectual and political task, because when the moment arrives, that the proportion of the electorate who will decide the

outcome demand to know what we are for, as distinct simply from what we are against, we have to be able to answer the question comprehensively.

We have to face up to the reality that it will not be possible to rebuild our public health service, eradicate housing waiting lists, develop a proper pension provision for all who work in the private sector and all the other aspects of public provision which characterise a civilised society, while simultaneously abolishing property tax, eliminating water charges and removing the burden of the Universal Social Charge on low to middle income families, all in one go. We have to develop clear, coherent priorities around egalitarian concepts of public provision underpinned by fair taxation and sustainable economic growth. Moreover, we have to be able to demonstrate the capacity to provide stable Government and an economic and industrial policy that recognises the reality of globalisation and the key role that foreign direct investment must continue to play here for a long time to come.

However, what the first **Left of Centre government** in the history of the State could do is to reassert the interests of the common good, shifting the balance decisively in favour of working people and those who depend most on public services.

All this calls for a level of intellectual engagement around policy formation, free of the restrictions of sectarian party political interests. It is not enough for any party or individual on the Left to do well in the election. The inevitable corollary of that is that the political Right will win and reassert absolute

hegemony over policy formation, thus reinstating the order of things that has led us to our third major economic collapse in sixty years rendering us uniquely as the only country in Europe with a lower population than it had in the pre-famine 1840s.

Our recent history provides a salutary lesson on the consequences of allowing the Right an absolute monopoly of power. We know what happened following the 1997 General Election when the virulently neo-liberal so called Progressive Democrats grabbed the balance of power. The ensuing years saw the privatisation of our key strategic telecoms company, Eircom, the selling off of our three State Banks, the promotion of policies to transfer wealth upwards and the dismantlement of financial regulation - resulting in the ensuing credit led property bubble and catastrophic collapse.

We must never let it happen again, we must set aside petty sectarian differences and seize the moment. This is the challenge presented by the legacy of Jim Larkin, James Connolly and all of their heroic comrades. More importantly, it is the challenge presented by the interests of civil society and the primacy of the common good today and for the future.”

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