

12<sup>th</sup> April 2021

Ms Arlene Foster, MLA  
Party Leader  
DUP

Dear Arlene

I write to you in your capacity as leader of your party in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The unacceptable violence over the last number of days had led to the injury of police officers, an attack on journalists and the hijacking and torching of a Translink bus which could have had more serious implications for the driver and passengers and indeed the relevant local community. The violence has also heightened a sense of real fear for some people living in their communities. As the representatives of workers in Northern Ireland we cannot and will not accept such violence against any worker going about his or her duty in the interests of the public at large.

There is absolutely no excuse nor defence for this violence. It seems from the public debate in recent days there are multiple reasons behind it. Irrespective of your political position on the various issues of the day it seems that the episode of serious violence does relate to a range of issues including but not exclusively to Brexit, the NI protocol, the issue of identity, the decision of the PPS not to pursue prosecutions resulting from the Storey funeral, a sense of alienation, a sense of not being represented or heard, social deprivation and poverty, the feeling of exclusion and a sense of losing out and indeed boredom etc.

The trade union movement in Northern Ireland have for a long time been raising the issue of making work pay and have sought to address the real issue of in and out of work poverty. Regrettably, we know Northern Ireland remains one of the poorest regions of the UK, with the highest proportion of low wage jobs. Indeed, a staggering 1 in 4 of all workers in Northern Ireland earn below the real living wage. Our economic inactivity figures remain stubbornly high and we have a skills challenge. While it is fair to say there have been some well-intentioned attempts to address some of these issues, it seems we continue to fail as there remains no clear joined up thinking nor comprehensive engagement with all relevant stakeholders concerned to chart a viable realistic path forward. The fact that employment rights is a devolved matter here, unlike in Scotland and Wales is a huge advantage to Northern Ireland, yet we have failed to make this advantage press home.

Clearly some elements of the wider unionist community also take issue with the NI protocol to varying degrees and indeed there have been some problematic unintended consequences of the protocol that should be addressed. We believe the best way to address this is for both the UK and Irish government in conjunction with the EU to engage and work with the 5 party Executive and importantly, wider civil society to examine these issue directly albeit clearly

within the context of accepting that Brexit has occurred and is a reality, while also not infringing nor undermining the integrity of the EU single market. We believe there must be space created within this context to seek to explore and address the relevant issues where the voice of everyone in Northern Ireland can be heard and considered and whereby this process engages both with the peoples' representatives politically, (but also through other structures including trade unions, business and the community and voluntary sector). People need to feel this is being done *with* them and not *to* them.

Therefore, I am calling on the 5 party Executive to now come together and agree to set up a meaningful forum whereby the Executive and politicians, the trade union movement, employers and crucially the community and voluntary sector – with particular emphasis on the community organisations in the areas where the violence has been prevalent, can engage directly with one another on this issues referenced above and seek to agree a way forward. A way to make Northern Ireland work for everyone, where work can pay, where people feel comfortable with their identity and not threatened and whereby respect and partnership are the cornerstones of our progress.

This type of process is advocated in the spirit and text of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and indeed the New Decade New Approach Agreement, both of which promote such forums whereby politicians engage directly with the citizenry of Northern Ireland through structures where the people trade union representatives, community and voluntary representatives and business representatives can assist in the progress we all urgently need. The Executive has failed to develop such forums be they social dialogue or civic dialogue previously (with the notable exception of the NI Engagement forum dealing with labour market related issues relating to Covid 19). This now needs to be urgently attended to.

I would like to meet with you to discuss this proposal further and I hope that you and your party will commit to such a process or a meaningful version of such a process in the interests of all of the people of Northern Ireland. It is imperative that the 5 party Executive show the appropriate and necessary leadership. We in the trade union movement and indeed others across civic society want to assist in this process.

I look forward to hearing from you.

**Yours sincerely,**

**Personal Data**

**Owen Reidy**  
**Assistant General Secretary**