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NIC-ICTU comments on Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill

About the Irish Congress of Trade Unions

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) is the trade union federation for the island of Ireland, representing approximately 800,000 working people, 200,000 of whom live and work in Northern Ireland. Congress seeks to achieve a just society—one which recognises the rights of all workers and citizens to enjoy the prosperity and fulfilment that underpin a good quality of life. Quality of life encompasses not only material well-being but also the freedom to participate in the arts, culture, and all aspects of civic life. This vision applies across Ireland, Europe, and the wider world, and challenges the existing economic order.

The Northern Ireland Committee (NIC) of ICTU is the representative body for 34 trade unions. In membership terms, it is the largest and most diverse civil society organisation in Northern Ireland and the largest organisation of Black and migrant workers in both jurisdictions. For more than a decade, women have constituted over 50% of our membership. Congress forms the Trade Union Council of the Isles with the TUC, STUC and Wales TUC, and is affiliated to the European TUC and the International Trade Union Confederation.

Weighting of Consultation Responses

ICTU is the largest representative and democratic organisation on the island of Ireland. This consultation response should therefore not be regarded as equivalent to a single individual response and must be weighted appropriately.

Endorsement of Other Responses

We are aware of responses from affiliated trade unions who speak for their members working in specific areas affected by the Bill. We endorse their contributions.

This is a response limited to one section of the Bill, the introduction of a new offence of assaulting a person delivering a public service, performing a public duty or providing a service to the public, or a person assisting such a person, along with a corresponding statutory aggravator for more serious offences.

We support this on the grounds that while most violent offences are committed in what could be described as an 'intimate' setting (that is, the victim is known to the

perpetrator), what unifies 'public workers' is that the reason they have been attacked or abused is because they went to work that day. Health and Safety legislation applies across all sectors, and NIC-ICTU strongly campaigns for better protections for all workers and a clear deterrence for those who would injure or abuse them, be they a member of the public or a reckless employer.

We have discussed this at the regular meeting of the trade union leadership, the NI Committee. While we support the broad definition of a 'Public Worker', we are clear in that we do not support mandatory minimum sentencing for serious offences, especially as campaigned for in memory of the murdered police officer Andrew Harper. We have taken onboard view of unions representing first responders and emergency services, and the consensus is that harsh mandatory minimum sentences can be counter-productive.

NIC-ICTU's overall position is that the Bill contains several important and necessary reforms, particularly in relation to assaults on public workers, hate crime aggravations and serious violence. However, we also stress that policy reform alone will not reduce crime in a sustainable way unless it is accompanied by investment in prevention, education from early childhood, and properly resourced public services.

We are also supportive of an augmentation to the Bill to include a misogyny aggravator given the acute levels of misogynistic violence against women and girls in NI, most gravely measured by 30 murders in recent years. Violence against women and girls is a serious and systemic issue. Women in public service roles are disproportionately exposed to harassment, sexual harassment, intimidation, and physical assault.

Misogyny and gender-based violence are unacceptable and must be met with strong legal consequences. They should also be tackled through education from an early age to promote equality and respect. NIC-ICTU supports properly funded services that actively prevent harm, support victims, educate and intervene early to stop abuse.

Workers across health, education, social care, housing, civil service and other public services are increasingly exposed to violence, threats, and verbal abuse in the course of their duties.

Similarly, in the private sector, workers who receive such abuse can be found in retail, in call centres, in care homes, hospitality, transport and other public facing roles.

This is unacceptable and has a direct impact on staff safety, morale, recruitment, retention, and service delivery. Unions operating in both public and private sectors welcome stronger legal protections, but emphasise that criminal sanctions must be accompanied by preventative workplace measures, including safe staffing levels, security provision, de-escalation training, reporting systems, and occupational health support.

In March 2026, the retail union USDAW issues the results of a survey of 180 Northern Irish retail staff which found that in 2025, 87% were verbally abused, 45% were threatened and 7% were assaulted.

In 2022, USDAW brought a motion to the policy-making conference for NIC-ICTU. Delegates approved and endorsed a call for “*a specific offence for abusing, threatening or assaulting a retail worker*”, noting similar legislation in Scotland, England and Wales.

“Conference firmly believes that all retail workers deserve legal protection from abuse, threats and violence. Effective legislation must be passed in Northern Ireland to protect retail workers and make it clear abuse is not part of the job.”

The USDAW General Secretary Joanne Thomas has recently welcomed “*the introduction of the Sentencing Bill by the Northern Ireland Executive that will create a new offence of assaulting a person providing a public service, performing a public duty or providing services to the public. USDAW and the Northern Ireland Retail Consortium made representations on this matter, and we look forward to continuing to engage with the Executive as this legislation passes through Stormont. After many years of campaigning, alongside retail employers, it really now feels like the Government is listening and taking action to give all retail workers across the UK the protections and respect they deserve.*”

Overall, we welcome the Bill as a necessary step in protecting public workers, while emphasising that legislation must be supported by proper resourcing, prevention measures and a wider commitment to safety and dignity at work.