

TROUBLING IRELAND

Dear Taoiseach
Michelle Burke

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Dear Taoiseach,

I write this more in sadness and frustration than anger as the daughter of a 65 year old father who spent 44 years of his life in the service of Waterford Crystal.

Like hundreds of other young Waterford city boys of his generation he began a five year apprenticeship at the tender age of fifteen, working for forty five hours a week in tough conditions; after which they qualified as either glassblowers or glasscutters. Many more young people went to work in ancillary but equally important positions related to the glassmaking process, Engineering, Melting, Furnaces, Batch, Quality, Transport, Packing, Acid Polishing and Clerical Admin etc, working diligently and skillfully to produce one of the world's finest products.

These young workers grew with the company as it expanded and prospered. Many of them became highly skilled master craftsmen while more went on to managerial or administrative positions, in sales, finance and manufacturing production. The combination of their imagination, skills and dedicated work ethic, produced some of the foremost and renowned crystal glass makers in the world, ie. Glass Blowers and Cutters, Designers, Crystal Sculptors and Copper Wheel Engravers.

These ordinary men and women, citizens of the historic city of Waterford and neighbouring counties, who over the last sixty years, building on the traditions of glassmaking stretching back to the seventeen hundreds, spectacularly and successfully re-established Waterford Crystal as the foremost sought after prestigious fine crystal in the world.

These then, Taoiseach, are the men and women who dedicated their lives to Waterford Crystal, who on the day they learned they were to be sacked by the faceless men of Bank of America, were confronted by hired bouncers whose job it was to literally throw them on the scrapheap. They received no compensation from their employer; despite the long service of the majority some of whom had in excess of four decades loyal service. Worse was to come as they learned that their pension scheme was closed down as it was deemed insolvent. This meant they would receive between a fifth to a quarter of their pension entitlement.

When reminded it was liable under a European Union Directive to protect the pension rights of employees in a situation of a double insolvency, the previous Government did nothing. As you are aware Taoiseach the workers through their Trade Union Unite took an action in the high court; the matter was referred to the European Court of Justice who fully and comprehensively found in favour of the workers. This finding published on the 26th April 2013 has not been acted on by your Government who I understand are legally obliged to do so.

The findings of the ECJ was a great boost to all the workers who believed that your Government should urgently act to address the situation, but three months later you seem content to leave the matter drag through the courts, this I've been told could take another 2 years at least.

Sadly 18 former workers have died since the closure in 2009, many without the justice they and their families deserve. Others are moving on in years and are not enjoying the best of health, many were exposed to hazardous chemicals and the arduous working conditions of the glassmaking process.

It is a sad reflection on your Government and the previous administration that five years after the closure of Waterford Crystal a large number of the workers felt compelled on the 17th of July 2013 to take their case to the steps of Dail Eireann to try and persuade Government in the light of the ECJ decision to honour their pension entitlements.

Taoiseach, as a citizen of this state I ask you to intervene and ensure justice is no longer denied to these proud honest hard working men and women who are the bedrock of any decent society, who contributed hundreds of millions of euros to the state over the sixty plus years of the existence of Waterford Crystal and who deserve our respect and gratitude, now that for so many their working lives are over.

Yours sincerely,

Michelle Burke