

UNEMPLOYMENT: **THE CMRS PROPOSAL**

There appears to be tacit acceptance at Government level that unemployment is likely to remain at around 300,000 for the foreseeable future. In fact some experts project a steady increase, and a figure of 380,000 by 1996 has been mentioned.

In the light of this, and accepting the devastating effect which unemployment has on the fabric of our society, it seems surprising that so little debate has taken place on the recent proposal by the Council of Major Religious Superiors. The basic idea is that unemployed people voluntarily make up their dole payments through 'real work at real wages', with some other 'perks' thrown in.

A summary of the proposals are as follows:

1. That the Government initiate and fund a scheme whereby unemployed people could opt for a job in the public, voluntary or community sectors, and the Department of Social Welfare would reallocate the person's unemployment entitlements to the employer.
2. The work done would be work of public or social value which was not currently being performed by full-time personnel, and it would be paid at the going rate for the job.
3. The new workers would be employed at that rate for as long as they needed to receive the net income equivalent to what they received on the dole.
4. They would lose none of their social welfare benefits.
5. They would be free to work an additional number of hours (suggested up to five) or to seek other employment for the remainder of the week, to enhance their income.
6. They would have a guarantee of being short-listed and interviewed for any full-time position which became available in the relevant area.
7. FAS would provide on-the-job training to enhance their employment skills.

The proposals have been criticised on a number of fronts, but no serious attempt has been made to publicly debate the pro's and con's. More importantly, no serious alternative has been suggested which would have any similar impact on unemployment numbers.

A sample of the criticisms are:

(a) Would a married person with a number of dependants require to work longer than a single person to "repay" his or her Social Welfare Allowance? (Perhaps the Single Social Welfare payment could form the basis of the work requirement, and Dependants' allowances could continue to be paid separately).

(b) The prospect of cheap labour will encourage employers to replace permanent workers with Social Welfare recruits. (Perhaps the specific work areas could be designated at the commencement of the scheme and agreed with the relevant unions).

Besides the proposals themselves, probably the most difficult task is the identification of specific areas of work which are not being done at the moment, and which could command agreement with existing employees.

A recent publication by the European Commission, dealing with the possibilities of creating meaningful work for the unemployed, suggested a number of areas where work needed to be carried out over and above what is being done at the moment, such as -

- home help for the elderly and handicapped, health care, meal preparation and housework;
- assistance for young people facing difficulties, comprising help with schoolwork, provision of leisure facilities (especially sports) and support for the most disadvantaged;
- provision of leisure and cultural facilities, provided they are thereby made more accessible to all (adjusted opening hours, lower prices, travelling shows, art schools etc.).

We feel the National Economic and Social Forum would be very happy to receive any representations to help them in their deliberations on this critical topic.

T.N.