COVID-19 Emergency: Urgent need to close construction sites in the interest of public health:

Dear Taoiseach,

Unite represents construction workers throughout Ireland. In view of the current COVID-19 emergency and the associated requirement to (1) observe hygiene measures and (2) maintain social distancing, our members are extremely concerned at the continued operation of non-essential construction sites and the risk this poses to them and members of the wider community.

We believe that sites should be closed immediately in the interests of public health, to help halt the spread of COVID-19 through our communities, thus preserving life as well as relieving pressure on our health services.

There are approximately 150,000 construction workers operating on sites around the country. In many cases workers travel significant distances from where they live to their current site. This travel itself poses a risk of the virus being transmitted, especially where workers travel together. Once on site, significant numbers of workers are often forced to congregate in a limited space – from queuing for changing facilities to listening to instructions. Many tasks require workers to work at close quarters (for example, pipefitting or jointly carrying heavy loads). Social distancing is impossible under these circumstances.

Most sites have very limited hygiene facilities (access to hot water, soap, paper towels, hand sanitiser), and supplies of these are often not replenished. Tools are shared between workers and there are no or limited facilities to disinfect tools between uses.

Under these circumstances our members are extremely concerned not only that they are exposing themselves to COVID-19, but also that, on returning home, they could unwittingly transmit the virus to their families and local communities.
Unite is therefore asking the Government, as a matter of urgency, to close all non-essential construction sites.

We would define essential sites and services as those relating to: The construction, extension or maintenance of health or pharmaceutical facilities, or similar, connected with the current emergency

- Works relating to the provision of essential services (e.g. utilities)
- Works relating to the provision of emergency assistance to households (e.g. burst water pipes, gas leaks and similar).

Government closure of non-essential construction sites is necessary to:-

1. Ensure that all workers losing their jobs as a result are covered by the COVID-19 provisions
2. Eliminate unfair competition between good employers who close their sites voluntarily as a result of the concerns mentioned above and employers who decide to continue operating regardless of those concerns.

Closure of construction sites should be accompanied by full protection of workers’ net take-home pay. I hope you will take on board the concerns of construction workers and act accordingly.

Yours sincerely

Tom Fitzgerald
Regional Officer for Construction
Unite the Union