

# INTERNATIONAL PROFILE OF IRISH PRISON GANGS IS GROWING

Key issues such as the proliferation and power of gangs on the inside (now a matter of major concern to the Prison Officers' Association) and the need to address the pending cycle of overcrowding by ensuring full capacity in the open centres and to reopen the Training Unit in Mountjoy were high on the agenda at the POA conference in April.

**G**angs, particularly in Mountjoy Prison, now have an international profile and significant funds to run their operations like a business, prison officers heard at this year's annual conference in Kilkenny.

Addressing POA delegates, Deputy General Secretary Jim Mitchell said that gangs have a hierarchy within the prison estate and have a number of 'contractors' that they hire 'work 'out to.

"There are nearly 30 factions within Mountjoy that cannot mix for a variety of reasons. Due to the number of groups now operating in our prisons the logistical difficulties alone of keeping one group from another are staggering.

"This has resulted in officers getting injured while keeping groups apart, while the attackers know that they will be amply rewarded or avoid punishment by carrying out an attack. Even now we have groups of armed henchmen that accompany their visitors. The daily threat to our members and the understandable ongoing concern of families is a serious issue for our association."

Mitchell said, "The establishment of a unit to deal with violent and disruptive prisoners in the Midlands Prison does not adequately address the difficulties created by these gangs. The state has built up significant experience of dealing with disruptive prisoners – dating back to the early 1970s.

"A number of these prisoners have been transferred to Portlaoise, but surely the present Minister must put ALL of these individuals into the only prison in the state equipped to deal with them. The state must take charge of these gangs in the prisons with the appropriate supports in the appropriate environment. These gangs must be controlled or we will lose control of our prisons."



Mitchell noted that the level of violence in Irish prisons can be directly attributed to the gang culture, adding that if the gangs are not controlled, "we have no chance of reducing the violence".

## OVERCROWDING CONCERNS

John Clinton, POA General Secretary, who raised the issue of overcrowding in Irish prisons, said that the return to the bad old days posed a threat to both prisoners and staff. "We were working on the basis that this matter had been resolved, never to return, but this clearly

is not the case."

Clinton continued, "Our members are once again working in overcrowded prisons, and dealing with all the related problems. The prison population has again reached a level where some are doubling, trebling and quadrupling occupancy in cells. Prisoners are again being forced to sleep on mattresses on cell floors and this is a totally unacceptable situation".

"Prisoners are being moved from floor to floor and transferring from one prison to another without any centralised flow plan, which is sadly reminiscent of the 90s. Mattresses are being put on floors in an all too familiar reminder of the nightmare scenarios of holding cells being packed to capacity."

Clinton then raised the issue on the closure of the Training Unit in Mountjoy – a loss of 90 to 100 beds. "This unit can be quickly renovated and reopened. The former Training Unit provided prisoners the opportunity to learn about going to work and became a learned function and a step towards a normal living environment."

The POA is now asking the Minister for Justice to address this pending cycle of overcrowding by ensuring full capacity in the open centres and to reopen the Training Unit in Mountjoy as a way on immediately and proactively dealing with the overcrowding issue.