

Lights. Camera. Labour action? Film workers want their cut from boom

A €200m audiovisual action plan could further boost the film sector but staff want a fair slice of a growing pie, writes **Rose Ugoalah**

THE Irish film and television industry has taken centre stage this year. The recently published Oireachtas report on working conditions within the industry, and an impending review of the Section 481 tax incentive may fuel significant change.

In June, the Government published the €200m Audiovisual Action Plan, which demonstrates how the sector is forecast to play an important role in Ireland's future, aiming to make it a global hub for the production of film, television, and animation.

The industry has been the recipient of critical praise and commercial success. Productions like *Room*, *The Breadwinner*, and *Star Wars* have proven that the quality of film produced on the island are on par with cinema around the world. But recently some film workers have confessed that they struggle with job security, job stability and career progression. Earlier this year, the Oireachtas Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht held two meetings on working conditions and development in the film industry.

The meetings were attended by various industry stakeholders, including the chief executive of Screen Ireland (formerly the Irish Film Board), the CEO of Screen Producers Ireland (SPI), and union representatives from Siptu, Irish Equity, GMB Trade Union, and the Irish Film Workers Association.

Some of the main concerns addressed were job security, working hours and qualified workers being employed as trainees.

The system's fairness has been brought into question, as its success is contrasted with an industry that lacks vital infrastructure, a system in which the construction of a secure foundation has been tasked to the workers to build themselves.

Costume supervisor Rhona McGuirk has worked in the film and television industry for 35 years. She started as a trainee and has advanced to the role of supervisor. McGuirk is currently the representative for the newly formed Costume Guild of Ireland, which is a collective that aims to bring together all those working in the costume department on film and television.

"Because we're all freelance and go from job to job, there is no job security," she said. "I don't know if it can be changed to be honest with you. It's never been there."

She says that there used to be a progression for trainees in the costume department: trainees were required to work full-time on five productions, including one period production, before they could upgrade to become an assistant, but she said over time this process was abandoned.

"I would members are currently reviewing the 2010 SPI/Siptu Shooting Crew Agreement ahead of talks with Siptu, which will represent them in negotiations with production companies.

McGuirk is optimistic that meetings will help to fine-tune the 2010 agreement, which she said lacked clarity especially in reference to the issue of working hours. "We want to be stronger when it comes to negotiations with Siptu and SPI," she said. "We want a simply worded agreement that is airtight, transparent and adhered to by producers."

Some of the main issues the Guild will be addressing are pension options, established rates of pay, interpretation of working hours, and the promotion of training.

Film work is such that the majority of employees are on fixed-term contracts, meaning that when the assigned task is completed – or when the production ends – so does the job.

Lack of employment continuity is a result of the precarious nature of film work. Workers experience months of unemployment between jobs with no guarantee of when the next job will come or if they will be hired on it.

Oireachtas Committee chair Peadar Kirby said he has since met directors, crew members and unions to further discuss the issues brought forth earlier this year. "Ideally work should be permanent," Kirby said. "The costs of life are permanent, and when work is precarious, permanent costs are hard to cover."

Kirby likened the structure of work in the film industry to similarly structured work in the construction industry, in that the completion of a construction project also signals the end of a



Ireland has attracted many high-end movie and TV productions, including Vikings, main picture, BBC's *Ripper Street*, *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, and *Room*

job for a construction worker. He said that the construction industry has found a way to keep their workers employed by having construction companies directly employ workers, and this method could be mirrored in the film industry.

"There are steps the Government could take to improve the experiences of workers," Kirby said. Some of the key recommendations the committee made in the published report include the implementation of sustainable pension structures and a call on the Government to develop plans that ensure that gaps in work are counted towards employment rights and redundancy. They also include a reform of training in the sector including additional finance to improve training and development, the introduction of formal apprenticeships, and training that has recognised qualifications and a clear beginning and end.

There was also a call for workers within the craft grades to be nominated on the board of Screen Ireland in order to have their perspectives and needs included in the industry's development. In regard to the Section 481 film incentive, the committee supports it but recommends an international comparative study be constituted to analyse its strengths and weaknesses in order to aid its improvement, evolution and security of foreign investment.

In recent years, series such as *Vikings*, *Ripper Street*, and *Into the Badlands* have repeatedly returned here to film, and all have availed of Section 481 funding. Part of the attraction to film in Ireland, the incentive allows for a payable tax credit of up to 32pc of eligible expenditure on an Irish television or film production.

Data obtained from Revenue through the Freedom of Information Act states that approximately €10.6m of Section 481 funding was applied for in 2017, and payments of €73m were made.

A full review of the funding scheme is currently underway in regard to its extension beyond 2020, and the Department of Finance will publish its findings later this year.

A much-discussed aspect of Section 481 funding is that it requires productions in receipt of it to provide quality employment and training; however, there is no criteria that identifies a

structured beginning and end to this training. Currently, the Revenue guidelines for Section 481 state that there must be a minimum of two trainees per €355,000 of corporation tax credit claimed, up to a maximum of eight trainees, must be employed on the production.

A props technician, who wishes to remain anonymous, said that he has been working in the Irish film industry as a trainee for 10 years.

The worker, who holds a degree in theatre studies, has also worked as a union shop steward and feels the issue of trainees is an area open to exploitation, which also includes unpaid overtime.

"Nobody is policing it," he said. "There's no log or list of trainees. It's a cheap workforce."

He was working as a trainee for four years before he began to inquire about progression to the next grade and was told by a producer that the trainee issue was not the producer's concern.

Screen Ireland, and his production company – Subotica – has been involved in both indigenous and international productions, such as *Song for a Raggy Boy*.

Prior to the report's publication Lynch said he was not sure of what impact – if any – it would have.

"Hopefully if there are positive constructive things within the recommendations, the industry will embrace those," said Lynch.

He said he has not had much issue working with film crews in Ireland. He thinks that the Oireachtas meetings earlier this year lacked balance and were not an accurate reflection of the opinions of Irish film workers as a whole.

He supports the ongoing discussions and said that there is an energy and willingness to resolve issues, as producers, unions, and guilds, engage and work on new shooting crew agreements and

construction agreements. "It's quite an exciting time because people are working together. We can actually make this a real creative strong industry," he said.

Lynch believes the industry has matured over the past few years into a modern industry prepared to face the future as the sector develops.

"There's so much possibility to grow it into something enormous, which is kind of exciting," he said.

He is particular impressed with the way in which members of various guilds within the sector are conducting themselves.

"The guilds are very interesting; those guys have really come together as people on the ground – crew members. They've really stepped up and are taking a lead in relation to things now. That's the really interesting thing that has come out of it [Oireachtas meetings]."

There is a willingness to resolve issues, as producers, unions, and guilds engage

As a result of further pursuit of the matter, he said he has been released from jobs and saw a reduction in the amount of subsequent work he was offered. This year he said he has only worked for two months.

"I'm surviving on my savings," he said. "All I did was raise legitimate concerns and now I have been blacklisted. Where else am I supposed to go?"

He said that as a trainee he earns about half of what he should be making. His experience is not isolated, as he said a co-worker of his had been employed as a trainee for 13 years.

He hopes the Oireachtas report will result in a balance between workers and employers.

Producer Tristan Lynch is a former director of

THE BIG TECH SHOW
with Adrian Weckler

COMMERCIAL PROPERTY

Value of Dublin office deals beats top UK regional cities by 78pc

Ronald Quinlan
Commercial Property Editor

WHEN it comes to Dublin's economic standing internationally, its reputation extends to pitch the capital at the level of a UK regional city.

A new report on the European office market shows that view is incorrect, with the capital outstripping the combined performances of Manchester, Birmingham and Edinburgh by a massive 78pc.

In terms of the overall European office market, Dublin ranks as the ninth most valuable city for lettings annually, sitting just behind Moscow (€158.4m) and Warsaw (€150.9m), but ahead of Madrid (€138.8m), Milan (€116.8m) and Amsterdam (€99.0m).

The analysis, which is included in Knight Frank's latest quarterly *Dublin Office Market Overview*, reaffirms London's status as Europe's leading city, with some €1.1bn in office lettings recorded annually.

Elsewhere, Knight Frank's analysis reveals that Dublin city centre accounted for a massive 78pc of all space let in the Dublin office market in the second quarter.

Dublin 4 increased its share of the capital's office market considerably, going from just 1pc in the first quarter to 26pc, following Google's decision to acquire the entirety of the €300m Boland's Quay scheme.

The US-headquartered web giant is set to take up 220,732 sq ft of office space at