

# Following rejection of pay deal, MLSA union faces key decision

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**As expected, the small union representing medical scientists has rejected the terms of 'Building Momentum', the new public service pay deal.**

The terms were rejected in a ballot of members of the Medical Laboratory Scientists Association (MLSA) by 96%, in a turnout of 71%, after the union's national executive had unanimously recommended against the deal.

The union must now decide, however, whether the deal - certain to be backed by a strong majority of ICTU public service unions - has the potential to meet its long standing pay claim. This could be a test case of sorts, both in regard to the sectoral bargaining clause in Building Momentum and of its dispute resolution mechanisms.

Kevin O'Boyle, the union's chairperson, welcomed the strong endorsement by the members of the committee's position. A "clear and strong message" had come from members that the proposed deal "does not address longstanding recruitment and retention issues in the laboratory sector and that these must be addressed urgently", he said.

The MLSA is now seeking further engagement with the HSE, Department of Health (DOH) and Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER).

## ***BACKING ASSURED***

ICTU public service unions are scheduled to count an aggregate ballot of all public service unions on February 23, to collectively accept or reject the public service pay proposal. But there is little doubt that the vast majority of delegates will back the deal – by a very strong majority\*.

Separately, the members of the Association of Higher Civil and Public Servants (AHCPs) voted by a large majority to accept the Building Momentum terms.

The top civil servants union said that 56% of the its 3,000 members voted in the ballot on its executive committee's recommendation to accept. The proposal was carried, with 93% of the votes in favour.

## ***WEIGHING UP NEXT MOVE***

Meanwhile, MLSA's rejection leaves that union with a decision to make: go-it-alone, by not accepting the aggregate ballot result, as it indicated it would do recently, or seek to work with the new sectoral bargaining clause in an effort to make progress on its claim

MLSA general secretary, Terry Casey, said in the union's statement that they are scheduled to meet employers in the WRC before the ICTU vote. "Future decisions, including how the Union would respond if the pay proposal was accepted on aggregate and its position on industrial action, would be informed by the discussions at this meeting", he said.

The union's claim is for a restoration of pay parity with scientific colleagues who work in Biochemistry Laboratories, dating back to 2002. The medical scientists carry out identical work, with the same responsibilities, and yet the union says they are paid on average 8% less.

Strength of feeling among union members and activists on the pay claim is understood to be at an all-time high.

But they will understand the likely consequences should they go ahead and reject an ICTU aggregate result, and fail to 'sign up' to the terms of Building Momentum. Public Expenditure & Reform (DPER) will expect no less, and any failure to abide by a majority decision could see the union left outside even the basic terms of the deal.

Secondary teachers have seen in the past how costly such a stance can turn out to be.

### *POTENTIAL TO DELIVER?*

One chink of light for the med lab scientists is the sectoral bargaining clause, which is worth the "equivalent of a 1% increase in annualised basic salaries". The union will have to decide if this clause has the potential to secure their claim, if not immediately, then over the medium term?

One overlooked feature of the two year public service agreement, is that it is regarded as a bridge to the next one. A paragraph in the section explaining how the sectoral bargaining element is going to work, states as follows:

*"Where issues are not fully or only partially addressed, these outstanding elements will fall to be addressed in a future Sectoral Bargaining Fund as part of the next Agreement". (clause 2.3.4)*

In other words, while a substantial long standing claim, akin to that presented by the MLSA, might not be manageable within the confines of what is going to be set aside for each group this time around, that doesn't mean claims won't be accommodated over a longer timeframe.

The alternative could mean a sort of IR "wilderness" for the med lab scientists and their union. They would also be rejecting "money on the table" and that goes against the instinct of most union negotiators.

\*As of this week, delegate figures in respect of each ICTU public sector union were still unavailable ahead of the meeting of all relevant affiliates on February 23. Delegates are decided on a weighted basis, with the larger unions getting proportionately less votes than the smaller affiliates. The system loosely resembles the US Electoral College. The key change will be to account for the merger of IMPACT, PSEU and CPSU, to form Fórsa in 2018.