

Public Service sectoral bargaining: majority opt for “straight one per cent”

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A majority of public servants have chosen to opt for the “straight one per cent” pay increase allowable under the ‘sectoral bargaining’ clause of the Building Momentum agreement, with some significant exceptions.

Under the BM agreement, individual groups, grades and categories of civil and public servants can opt to use the 1% sectoral allocation as a sectoral pay round, payable on February 1, 2022.

Alternatively, they can use the allocation to deal with outstanding adjudications, recommendations, awards or claims, up to the value of 1% of pensionable pay.

The central idea behind the clause is to cater for categories or groups of employees with issues that couldn't be dealt with outside of a national agreement framework.

Groups from secondary teachers' (pay equity), special needs assistants and med lab scientists (pay parity) – to take just three examples - have been pursuing their claims for years.

The sectoral bargaining clause was seen as a way of accommodating these long standing claims. Progress has been made in some cases, in others agreement is close, but for some applicants the one per cent may not be enough to meet the cost of claims.

Sectoral bargaining is also seen as a test of the public service agreement system, in that it must be seen to ensure industrial peace if it is going to be judged a success and worth continuing.

LARGE GROUPS

One of the first large groups to opt for the one per cent to be paid as a basic one per cent wage rise were Forsa's clerical, administrative and executive grades, covering thousands of workers in areas like health.

Similarly, the union's members in the civil service have also accepted the straight one per cent rise from February 1.

Meanwhile, another very large grouping, SIPTU members in public service administration, which includes staff in local authorities, have opted for the straight one percent.

However, some SIPTU categories in the health sector are using the clause to address claims, IRN understands.

LOCAL DEALS

Last week, Fórsa 12,000 special needs assistants (SNAs) backed a proposal to increase the top pay point – €1,100 higher than the current maximum – at the top of their pay scale, as an alternative to accepting the straight one per cent.

Senior Executive Officers (SEOs) and analogous grades also backed payment of an outstanding award achieved by going down the sectoral bargaining route. The union said the ballot result (94% in favour) “showed a clear support to move the sectoral bargaining fund - equal to 1% of the total Senior Executive Officer and analogous grades’ pay - onto the top (LSI 2) of the SEO pay scale”.

In third level education, members of IFUT and SIPTU opted for the straight one percent, whereas teachers in primary and second level education opted for the local bargaining route, principally seeking two goals: firstly, progress on pre and post-2011 pay scales for secondary teachers; and secondly, allowances for primary level principals, the latter a hold-over from an award made in the second report of (now defunct) Public Service Benchmarking Body. Talks on these deals are understood to be at a crucial stage.

RESTORING DIFFERENTIAL

The INMO – over 40,000-strong – is looking to the findings of the expert review body on nursing and midwifery, which recommended a pay rise of 3.28% for nurse management grades. The aim is to restore differentials for these higher grades following on from the outcome of the 2019 nurses strike, which didn’t benefit this particular cohort.

The Garda Representative Association and Garda Superintendents both signalled their preference to opt for the straight one per cent, while RACO, the defence forces body representing rank and file personnel, opted for the same route.

The MLSA hopes that its med lab scientist members can achieve parity with scientific colleagues in Biochemistry Laboratories. The union voted to reject the Building Momentum agreement, but as an affiliate of ICTU it abides by the terms of the deal. However, the union has an uphill task in reaching its parity goal within a one per cent envelope, as the claimed pay gap is around 8%.

SECOND TIME AROUND

The last time such a local bargaining exercise was tried was almost two decades ago and led to a second round of claims, as some groups came back for more. The Public Service

Benchmarking Body, in 2002, sought to end that particular merry-go-round by severing all previous pay links and “establish new absolute levels of pay”.

But two decades later, relativities and linkages have re-emerged, and the current sectoral bargaining clause is supposed to address these.

It must also be remembered that the current clause is a by-product of the strike by nurses and midwives in 2019. This triggered claims by other public service unions who sought to ‘catch up’ with the INMO’s gains.

Sectoral bargaining talks in late 2019 were halted by the pandemic, but were given concrete expression a year later in the sectoral bargaining clause of Building Momentum. This was meant to deal with outstanding claims, although - as the evidence shows - a majority have opted for a straight one per cent pay rise.

Whether the experiment will be part of the next public service agreement, depends on how Public Expenditure & Reform and the trade unions assess its operation. They may see its continuation as a useful way of tidying up issues and claims that get caught up in the standard ‘no cost increasing claims’ clause, common to all of these agreements.