

Public service unions seeking talks, but say Government must improve offer

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Public service unions have told the Government that they cannot credibly reach a pay deal for 2023 until the terms of the current Building Momentum (2021-22) agreement have been “properly reviewed and adequately improved”.

The Public Services Committee (PSC) of ICTU, through their chair, Kevin Callinan, were updating Liam Kelly, Director General of the Workplace Relations Commission, on Wednesday, June 29, regarding their current position on the stalled pay talks.

The Commission has been facilitating the talks between the PSC and officials from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, acting on behalf of the Government.

No indication DPER has been sanctioned to make an improved offer

The talks broke down on Friday, June 17, after the unions said that a formal pay offer from the official side wasn't sufficient to put to a ballot of over 300,000 public servants.

In his letter, Mr Callinan informs Mr Kelly that at a meeting this week, the PSC officers had briefed affiliate unions on the discussions so far, “and on the current DPER position as communicated to us”. This was the first time the committee had met “since we had briefed affiliates early on the morning of Friday 17th June within hours of the talks being adjourned”.

When the talks adjourned, the offer on the table was for 2.5% extra for 2022 and a further 2.5% for 2023 – on top of the two increases (one percent on pay and a one per cent local bargaining element) already due for 2022 under the current Building Momentum agreement. In other words, 7% in total over two years (or 8% over 3 years, if the 2021 one per cent rise under the BM is included).

TANAISTE'S COMMENTS RAISED

In his letter to the WRC DG, Kevin Callinan touches on a sensitivity within the coalition Government, by observing that “understandably” trade union affiliates at Wednesday's PSC meeting, “had expected an improved Government pay offer to be made following the Tánaiste comments on RTÉ's Morning Ireland programme on Wednesday 22nd June”.

This was a reference to Leo Varadkar's comment that he was keen for there to be an agreement.

Mr Varadkar noted that current agreement (Building Momentum) gives public servants "an increase of between 2% and 3% a year this year plus increments - if they get an increment - and that is well below the rate at which inflation is currently running at and so understandably they're looking for a better pay increase".

Given that DPER Minister, Michael McGrath, is directly responsible for the negotiations, this intervention is understood to have not been well received by the Fianna Fail Minister.

OPEN TO A DEAL

In his letter, Mr Callinan tells Liam Kelly that the PSC officers had to inform affiliate unions that, "despite helpful informal contacts with the WRC, we have no indication that DPER has been sanctioned to make an improved offer, and that DPER officials had informed the WRC that the Government needs more time to reflect on its position."

His letter continues: "You are aware that the PSC triggered the Building Momentum review clause almost four months ago. Our objective was to review and improve the pay element of the agreement, taking account of higher-than-expected inflation in both 2021 and 2022.

"When it eventually responded in May, the Government indicated that it also wanted to discuss – and achieve certainty on – public service pay in 2023. The PSC officers were open to this on the explicit basis that it could not be a substitute for a review and improvement of the 2021-2022 (inclusive) pay terms.

"As you are aware, the Government has offered an additional increase of just 2.5% for the (2021-2022) period of the current agreement, which is now under review with the assistance of the WRC. This is clearly inadequate when inflation is likely to be at least 9% over that period."

ORDER OF BUSINESS

Mr Callinan said that it remains their position that "this offer cannot credibly be put to ballots of union members who, in common with workers across the economy, are currently bearing the full brunt of large and sustained increases in the cost of home heating, fuel, food, housing, childcare, and many other essentials".

He said the PSC has endorsed this position, "which cannot change unless the Government side is prepared to make an improved offer for 2021-2022".

Emphasising the distinction between revising the current deal (2021-2022) and the terms for 2023, Mr Callinan tells Mr Kelly that the PSC also agreed that its officers "could not credibly reach an agreement about pay in 2023 before the current pay terms of Building Momentum have been properly reviewed and adequately improved".

“ACHIEVABLE”

In setting out the state of play in this way, Mr Callinan is clearly distinguishing between their desire for a revised deal in respect of 2021-2022 (within the timeframe of Building Momentum) and the separate, albeit related, issue of pay in respect of 2023.

The Congress president continues: “Our understanding remains that the Government would prefer an extension of Building Momentum to be agreed and ratified prior to the October Budget statement. Although this would require individual union ballots to be conducted, it remains achievable if the Government side is prepared to make an improved offer, and if we can reach agreement on an outcome that can be credibly put to ballot.”

This can be interpreted as a clear indication that the unions are ready to re-enter talks if and when the government side comes to a decision on whether to refine or improve its offer.

Mr Callinan concluded his letter by telling Mr Kelly that the PSC officers “highlighted to affiliates our appreciation of the WRCs efforts and expertise in this matter, and said that we remain ready for further engagements in the WRC when you consider it worthwhile”.