

Higher civil servants vexed with 'FEMPI-style' changes to conditions

ANDY PRENDERGAST

The AHCPS have warned against a "FEMPI-style" approach to changing some of their members' terms and conditions, in the absence of adequate consultation, and still awaits a response from the Minister of Health over his comments regarding secret recordings of Health officials last year.

Two major issues of contention were raised at the annual conference of the Association of Higher Civil and Public Servants (AHCPS) last week: unilateral changes to civil servants' status in An Garda Síochána and the plan to grant the power of dismissal to grades below that of Secretary General in a department.

The Policing, Security and Community Safety Bill will provide for civilian staff at An Garda Síochána to become members of garda staff (i.e. they will no longer be civil servants of the Government but rather part of a single garda workforce). This change of status is subject to the making of a designation order by the Minister.

Before making such an order, the Minister has to consider any representations made by a recognised trade union or staff association in relation to the matter, which includes the AHCPS and Fórsa.

However, the primary legislation approach to changing terms and conditions is moving away from the normal IR way – and causing great unease with the civil service unions. There are up to 3,000 civilian staff in An Garda Síochána.

AHCPS Assistant General Secretary Billy Thompson said the union has had "a torrid time" on this matter and criticised the "FEMPI-like" approach. The union says that changing terms and conditions by primary legislation is "deplorable."

POWER OF DISMISSAL

The other "unilateral" move the union is angered by is the plan to grant the power of dismissal of a civil servant to a person below the grade of department secretary general. This issue was floated several years ago but is now back in the spotlight.

The conference condemned the measure, saying it opposes allowing someone below Sec Gen level being able to dismiss a civil servant.

AHCPS General Secretary, Ciaran Rohan said this plan together with the change for civilian staff at An Garda Síochána, “is suggestive of a significant and concerning policy agenda shift in relation to our civil service and will not serve this country well, in our view.”

HEALTH LEAKS

Union members also discussed the leaking of conversations between Health officials that were surreptitiously recorded – ostensibly as whistleblowing. What has compounded the problem for Health officials is that the Minister of Health Stephen Donnelly subsequently referred to the leaked conversations as coming within the realm of public interest.

The AHCPS wrote to the Minister regarding the comments he made last November but has yet to receive a reply from him.

The union says that contrary to the objectives to whistleblowing – to expose wrongdoing – there was no wrongdoing committed by the people recorded. It said what is wrong is to secretly record Health officials and then leak the conversations to the media.

PAY TALKS

Speaking on public service pay, Mr Rohan said with inflation currently running at 7.7% , the cost of living “is greatly impacting on members.”

Talks on a successor to Building Momentum “must make good the shortfall between pay and inflation”, he said and pointed to comments from the European Central Bank regarding excessive company profits as a bigger driver of inflation than wage demand.

“Many commentators are quick to try to dampen down wage demands with talk of a wage-price spiral. Our members can see through those arguments, particularly when they are exposed to obvious price-gouging. There can be no sustainable case for wage moderation while inflation continues to be driven by excessive company profits, neither in the public or private sector”, the union leader added.

The union also backed motions on a four-day week, blended working and to encourage ‘socio-economic’ status to be added as a protected ground in equality law.

The AHCPS now has a majority female membership (52%) and the union’s overall membership has grown year-on-year since 2014, reaching around 3,620 by last year.