

Public service unions set out stall for major talks ahead

ANDY PRENDERGAST

The public service committee (PSC) of ICTU have endorsed a four-pillar approach ahead of upcoming talks on a successor agreement to Building Momentum, which includes the desire to “normalise” IR.

As the end to the current Building Momentum agreement draws near, with the final tranche of a 1.5% pay increase (or €750, whichever is greater) due on 1 October, the union negotiators, led by Fórsa General Secretary Kevin Callinan, have agreed on four core principles.

Top of the priorities is their ambition to “secure appropriate pay measures in response to continuing cost-of-living pressures on working families.”

As with last year’s talks, any cost of living and taxation measures agreed by Government in the Budget may have an influence on what will be agreed by negotiators – and how such proposals will land with public and civil servants.

However, before talks on pay for 2024 and beyond can begin, the unions want to “stabilise” the current agreement. Mr Callinan explained on Wednesday of this week that the process for an important step under the current Building Momentum deal, ‘Clause 3.3’ – relating to outstanding issues for particular grades, groups and categories of public servants – has proved “inconclusive” so far.

SECTORAL ISSUES

Clause 3.3 of Building Momentum reads: ‘The Public Service Pay Commission in the context of its reports on recruitment and retention issues in the public service over 2018 and 2019 recommended that the parties should consider putting arrangements in place, at an appropriate time, and without compromising the stability of the public service pay bill, by which a broader review of public service pay could be progressed. A sectoral bargaining fund was established under Building Momentum, to provide a mechanism (as set out in section 2.1.1) to address some outstanding adjudications, commitments, recommendations, awards and claims. In order to build on this process, the parties agree that an initial exploratory engagement on the potential options for a future approach to such issues will take place in early 2023 with a view to informing negotiations on a successor public service agreement.’

Sectoral/local issues within the public service have become increasingly prominent in recent years and have put the ‘one size fits all’ approach under increasing strain. Mr Callinan

advocated for opening up local bargaining in the public service at the IRN Conference last June (see [IRN 24/2023](#)).

Mr Callinan noted that it was the intention of both union and Government representatives to have this process concluded before entering talks on a new agreement for 2024.

“To stabilise the current agreement, and to ensure a successor agreement commences on a solid foundation, an agreed process for dealing with issues affecting specific groups and grades is essential,” he said.

“NORMALISING” IR

Mr Callinan also pointed to unions’ desire to “move on from a process of industrial relations shaped by the response to the 2009 financial crisis”

What he means by this is to dismantle any remnant of the reviled FEMPI legislation, but also to secure full access to the Workplace Relations Commission and Labour Court for all members – which forms part of “normalising public service industrial relations”.

This is particularly the case for civil servants, whose collective issues are still funnelled through a conciliation and arbitration scheme. The largest civil service union, Fórsa, is seeking full access to the WRC and Labour Court. It is understood DPER previously indicated that further legislation would be needed to facilitate this.

The final pillar the ICTU PSC endorsed this week was on pursuing measures to ensure the “future-proofing of quality public services and public service employment.”

Mr Callinan said the most recent figures on population made this an essential feature of upcoming talks: “With a growing population of more than five million, we do need to ensure that the State can continue to build and maintain quality public services designed to respond to people’s needs,” he said.