

Fórsa leader criticises DPER for its alleged “stranglehold” over IR

BRIAN SHEEHAN

Ahead of the Government’s formal invitation to public service unions to talks on a new pay agreement, the head of Fórsa issued a hard-hitting statement setting out the challenges facing negotiators - and revealed areas of tension between the parties.

Kevin Callinan warned that a successor agreement will need to be negotiated and ratified before the current deal expires, cautioning that having no agreement “would radically alter the Irish industrial relations landscape”.

Mr Callinan, who will again lead the public services committee of ICTU in forthcoming WRC-facilitated talks, was openly critical of the role played by the department that stands guard over the public finances, when he called for “the need to remove the stranglehold of the Department of Public Expenditure, National Development Plan Delivery, and Reform (DPENDPDR) which is currently preventing the normal operation of our voluntarist system of industrial relations”.

Mr Callinan and his PSC colleagues have been pressing for a structure that could assess and decide on grade, category or group claims in a new agreement. However, that there may be resistance to this approach, which if it were to be included in a new agreement, would replace the sectoral bargaining element of the current Building Momentum agreement.

Meanwhile, there are a number of outstanding findings and final recommendations that remain to be implemented under the current agreement. Some of these have been through the Labour Court. Under the terms of successive public service agreements, such findings are binding, in industrial relations terms, on both parties.

As recently as last week, IRN reported on a case involving 7,000 members of the Irish Medical Organisation, in which the Court recommended that its terms – in favour of the union side – be acted on “without delay”.

PRE-TALKS ENGAGEMENT

In his statement, the Fórsa general secretary’s remarks appeared to go somewhat beyond the standard warnings and postures adopted by union leaders ahead of national pay talks.

Addressing a meeting of Fórsa’s “consultative council”, Mr Callinan said that in his view, “exploratory discussions have so far failed to produce the basis for negotiations that could lead to a multi-year deal on pay”. This situation presented a significant challenge: “Despite a

protracted phase of preliminary engagement, the sense we have is that a successful talks process is by no means certain and, at this stage, not anticipated”.

The acknowledgement that there has already been a preliminary engagement wasn't news, but the observation that it has been “protracted” but appears to have made little progress, was surprising. Progress is usually a pre-requisite before the commencement of the formal talks process, making it easier to “tee up” formal proposals.

But if little progress has been made, then the talks could conceivably break down. That would, of course, not be unusual because historically, breakdowns often precede breakthroughs. Such outcomes often have an element of choreography, an ingredient in national-level pay negotiations over many decades.

If the “multi-year public service agreements” that Mr Callinan says have been “customary” for more than three decades is not possible this time, he warned that the union would consider “initial warning strikes in key areas”.

This technique was employed “very successfully”, he said, by German unions last year, to be followed by both work-to-rule action and withdrawal of co-operation.

MULTI-ANNUAL DEALS

Mr Callinan went on to note that inflation “continues to erode pay gains, especially for low and middle-income earners”. He added: “Multi-annual deals provide a high degree of cost certainty, and stability, for the government. While we're willing to consider such a deal, we made it clear months ago that any deal would need to contain sufficient flexibility to address issues affecting specific groups of workers”.

If it proves impossible to achieve such a multi-annual framework, the Fórsa leader said they would, along with other unions, set their sights on achieving a pay round that addresses the shortfall in wages against inflation.

But a failure to agree a multi-annual approach “will represent a missed opportunity to have a more structured approach to the management of industrial relations, and the challenges affecting public service delivery resulting from demographic changes, recruitment and retention pressures and a tighter labour market”, he said.