

# Public service unions and government officials look set to enter talks

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**Public service unions are expected to accept a Government invitation to negotiate a new public sector pay agreement when they meet this Friday.**

If the unions do decide to enter talks, these will take place under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) and could be expected to commence in the very near future.

SIPTU's General Secretary, Joe Cunningham, said at his union's biennial delegate conference on Wednesday morning, that while the decision on whether to accept the invitation would be made on Friday, he hoped the talks would progress.

Instead of giving an immediate answer to the invitation by the Government, the four officers of the public services committee of ICTU had met virtually on Wednesday and decided that all 19 unions that are affiliated to Congress's Public Service Committee (PSC), will meet on Friday (17th November) to formally consider the talks invite.

In a common statement, the four said the meeting will "review developments" since the trade unions' approach to negotiations was established in September.

The statement noted the comments, made in his invitation by Public Expenditure & Reform Minister, Paschal Donohoe, that an agreement has the potential to provide certainty and stability in a "normalised industrial relations environment."

The union officers observed that they had identified the "normalisation of 'post-crisis' public service industrial relations" as a necessary step to the successful negotiation of another public service agreement, of the type favoured by the Minister, and "outlined by him in various media interviews".

The unions had indicated in September their desire to "move on from a process of industrial relations shaped by the response to the 2009 financial crisis," a reference to FEMPI legislation. Whether the Minister's reference to the potential for an agreement in a "normalised industrial relations environment" answers the union side's call in this regard remains to be seen.

## **THE VALUE OF “CERTAINTY”**

Issuing his invite, Minister Donohoe said he believes an opportunity exists for the parties “to intensify efforts to try to agree an appropriate successor agreement” to Building Momentum, which expires at the end of December. All parties will have particular issues they want to see addressed, he said, and the best way was to work through these issues with the expert assistance of the WRC.

The Minister referred to the “extensive engagement” between the parties over recent months. “In what is a difficult and complex endeavour, I believe all of our respective issues can best be progressed with the expert assistance of the WRC”.

He confirmed that its director general, Anna Perry, has indicated that the services of the Commission will be available.

Minister Donohoe said the discussions will be “challenging”. Any agreement would have to be appropriate to the context the country is currently facing, he cautioned, and “must be sustainable in the face of considerable global uncertainty - both economic and geopolitical”.

But he believed there is scope for all parties to engage constructively towards an agreement that provides “valuable certainty over the coming *years*” (IRN emphasis).

## **‘CATCH-UP’ CLAIMS**

The public service unions have said that securing appropriate pay measures in response to continuing cost-of-living pressures is their priority objective. They want a focus on “the stabilisation of any future agreement”, through mechanisms to resolve outstanding issues affecting public service grades, groups and categories, in addition to measures to ensure the ‘future-proofing’ of quality public services and public service employment.

This issue of category, grade and group claims is sure to be difficult to secure agreement on, given the potential cost involved. Already, under the current agreement, there are several outstanding finalised claims that remain to be implemented.

A successor agreement would also need to be negotiated and ratified before the current deal expires, the unions argue. Both parties will want a proposed agreement to emerge before Christmas, so that an offer can be balloted on early in the New Year.

John King, SIPTU’s deputy general secretary, also raised a continuing issue of special concern for his union this week, namely the question of clauses contained in successive public service agreements that protect against outsourcing.

In a separate statement, issued in his capacity as Fórsa general secretary, the PSC’s lead negotiator, Kevin Callinan, referred to the “stranglehold” that DPER – in his view – has over industrial relations. This suggests there will be some difficult talking to be done in

forthcoming engagements. (See *'Fórsa leader criticises DPER for its alleged "stranglehold" over IR' in this issue*)