

State's affordable housing agency rejects union recognition

**Brian Sheehan**

**The Land Development Agency (LDA) told Fórsa that it has a 'positive and collaborative' relationship with its staff and that it is not required to recognise the union.**

Katie Morgan, Head of Services and Enterprises Division of Fórsa, told delegates at the union's divisional conference this week that in a situation where an employer is in receipt of substantial public funds, the denial of their right to organise "is especially problematic".

She accused the LDA of having "outdated ideas" about trade union representation.

The LDA strongly rejected the points made by Ms Morgan, claiming that its professional staff have no industrial relations issues – and it is not required in law to enter any agreement with Fórsa.

A commercial state body that is responsible for affordable housing delivery, the LDA is in receipt of substantial public funds but has refused to recognise Fórsa, the union's conference heard.

Ms Morgan claimed the LDA "refuses to allow us on the premises", adding that it employs "around 200 people" on individually negotiated contracts.

"It is shameful that Fórsa members employed by the LDA are currently forced to meet with union representatives off-site, because the employer refuses us entry. That is not the behaviour of a modern, ethical, or law-abiding public agency", Ms Morgan said.

She said "no employer in this country should have a veto on union recognition".

#### **NO IR ISSUES – LDA**

Responding, a spokesperson said the LDA "has a highly positive and collaborative relationship with its staff, who comprise a relatively small number of mainly mid to senior level professionals on individually negotiated contracts, in common with other comparable state bodies".

The LDA "does not employ any construction workers directly as its affordable housing projects are outsourced to building contractors", the statement said.

It claimed there are "no industrial relations issues at the LDA, nor have any staff indicated any such issues".

On the issue of meeting with the trade union, the spokesperson said that senior LDA executives had "a respectful meeting with senior Fórsa representatives, where it outlined that the LDA fully respects the legal right of any employee to join a union".

Following this meeting, the statement said Fórsa requested the LDA "to enter a bespoke agreement which is not required by any law or regulation".

This agreement would stipulate that the LDA "would solely recognise Fórsa as the trade union for LDA staff, and the LDA would deduct Fórsa union subscriptions directly from staff salaries".

"As signing up to such an agreement is not required by any law and would not benefit its current collaborative working relationship with staff, the LDA respectfully declined to enter the agreement and continues to engage directly with its staff in a positive and collaborative way", the statement concluded.

## **“BREAKTHROUGHS”**

Meanwhile, Katie Morgan told delegates the union had seen some employers “integrate their hostility to union representation into their brand”, only to arrive at a point – sometimes precipitated by a crisis – where “they realise it makes sense to negotiate with unions.”

This was a reference to “breakthroughs” made by the union with Emerald Airlines and Ryanair.

Ms Morgan said that the LDA “may think that locking union officials out of buildings” and “ignoring calls for an industrial relations agreement” is the only way to do business. But she said that “even Ryanair has said – most recently at the Industrial Relations News conference in March – that the airline knew it was not a matter of if they would ever recognise the union, but when”.

Seven-and-a-half years after union recognition at Ryanair, she recalled, “we’re negotiating pay, and terms and conditions of employment with an employer who used to say – very loudly – that it would never happen”.

“In that context”, she said, “the LDA’s hostility to Fórsa strongly suggests management hasn’t yet figured out what Ryanair and Emerald figured out eventually. It’s simply better to work with us. Why? Because it’s the right thing to do for the workforce, because we can work collaboratively to help improve the workplace, and because we will never give up”.

The Fórsa official added that the Government is to finalise its action plan on the promotion of collective bargaining by the end of this year. “As these initiatives develop, the LDA’s position looks increasingly out of step”, she claimed.