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Fórsa Civil Service Division Conference 2018

Speech by Fórsa General Secretary (Public Service) Tom Geraghty

INTRODUCTION

Colleagues,

Somewhat belatedly, but no less sincerely, I would like to join in welcoming you to this the first Civil Service Divisional Conference of our new union, Fórsa. I appreciate that the sheer scale of this event is somewhat new to most of us and that some of the organisational arrangements differ from what we are used to but that is probably inevitable. This is the first large scale event of this kind and we have had to adapt by working together and pulling the best ideas for conferences out of the three previous unions. Because it is the first major outing of this sort, I ask you please to bear with us. Hopefully there are no major problems and, if they arise, we will use this opportunity to learn.

PUBLIC SERVICE STABILITY AGREEMENT

As you all know, all three of the former unions ratified the Public Service Stability Agreement and that sets the parameters within which we will do our business for the next few years. However, nothing in our business stands still and even within the terms of the PSSA, provision is made to discuss certain outstanding issues.

NEW ENTRANTS' PAY

The most well publicised issue for further discussion and exploration within the terms of the agreement is that of the pay of those who entered the public service since 2011.

Pay equity is a priority for all trade unions, and Fórsa firmly believes that pay policy must work for all civil and public servants, including lower-paid groups like the 30,000 clerical officers and related grades we represent.

The imposition of two-tier pay scales, which were 10% lower at each point for new staff, were imposed in January 2011. They were among the many cuts – including pay cuts averaging 14% for all civil and public servants – imposed, without agreement, by the then-Government in 2009-2010.

Since then, every bit of progress in addressing this injustice has been achieved by unions collectively, through national pay negotiations and public service pay agreements.

We took the first opportunity to address the injustice in the negotiations that led to the 2013 Haddington Road agreement. As a result, the two-tier pay scales were scrapped. But new entrant pay scales retained two extra points and, therefore, those employed since the start of 2011 still have to work two more years before reaching the top of their scales.

We returned to the issue in the talks on the current public service pay deal – the Public Service Stability Agreement – and, because of this, we will again be negotiating with the Department of

Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) next week, with the aim of reducing the length of scales by two points.

As well as dealing with the technical challenges of doing this fairly, in a way that works for public servants with different lengths of service – and pay scales of vastly different lengths – we will press for the scales to be shortened as quickly as possible.

While it is correct to say that no monies have been allocated to do this in 2018, I believe that Ireland's strengthening economic and exchequer recovery means it should be possible to start funding it next year, rather than delaying until 2020 and the post-PSSA period. That would require funds to be allocated in October's Budget.

STARTING PAY ON ASSIGNMENT

A less publicised but nonetheless important issue is that of the starting pay of members upon promotion or following assignment through open competition. In addition to operating an archaic and overly complex set of starting pay rules in the Civil Service, we have the rather ridiculous situation whereby staff in one part of the public service are given no credit for service if successful in being appointed elsewhere in the public service, so, for instance, somebody with a lifetime's service in Local Government upon competing successfully for a Civil Service post is expected, unless they are deemed to be in an analogous grade, to start at the first point of the relevant scale. There is agreement in principle to addressing this anomaly and we are working on the details of an entirely new and improved system. When this process is completed, it will help to open up the rest of the public service to members beyond their own immediate employment, for career advancement opportunities.

PEOPLEPOINT

Since the new union was established, perhaps more time has been spent by the Divisional Executive Committee discussing problems experienced by members in their dealings with HR Shared Services, known previously as PeoplePoint, than on any other single set of issues. This is reflected in the motions on our agenda on the subject. Our recent survey has revealed a wide range of difficulties across the entire span of HR interactions. We have evidence of horrendous experiences for members who have found themselves, inadvertently and unknown to them, in circumstances where it was discovered that they had received over-payments and that they were deemed to owe substantial amounts of money, often at times when their income has been reduced due to being ill and when, as a result, they were in the worst possible position to have to make repayments. We have had underpayments, we have had delays in payments due, we have had problems with having proper records kept for leave etc. etc.

In this context, our members working in the HR Shared Services have been in the frontline in taking the brunt of the frustration of other members because of the systematic failings of an organisation for which they are not responsible. Interestingly, and perhaps tellingly, a longstanding request from the Civil Service unions to meet the group of Secretaries- General of Government Departments so that we might glean how they feel about their inability as employers to provide adequate HR support to their staff, has yet to receive a response.

WORKING HOURS

No issue took up as much time in last year's pay talks than the issue of working time. It remains one of the biggest grievances for our members that a measure introduced in our recent economic emergency has not been dismantled now that we have moved on to somewhat better times. The fact

that despite all the time and effort devoted to it, we could not budge the employer to roll back any part of the additional working time is, itself, an indicator of how difficult it will continue to be to make any progress on the matter and it would be foolish of me to appear to make any promises on the issue.

We did make some headway in enabling people to opt to work the pre Haddington Road hours with a commensurate cut in salary and we are running a pilot to allow people to use some annual leave in terms of hours on the clock, both of which initiatives came from the union side to facilitate those people who told us that this was the most important issue for them, even more important than pay.

However, the substance of the problem remains unresolved and perhaps the only promise that can be made is that we will revisit in future negotiations.

Allowances

An unexpected issue came to attention regarding allowances when the legislation to give effect to the PSSA was published. Allowances never feature in national pay discussions as they usually just increase in line with basic pay. The legislation provided for a standard restoration of 5% from a single date in October 2020 rather than for the various percentage restoration increases over the life of the agreement. The reason advanced was that allowances were cut by a standard 5% in 2010 when pay was cut by varying amounts. However, the effect is to delay restoration of the cut. The ICTU Public Services Committee met the Minister who, to be fair, grasped the problem. However, he stated that he had no available funds to deal with the issue in 2018 while noting that the matter could be discussed by the agreement's Oversight Body. The issue is under discussion there and we are seeking a 2019 solution.

ORGANISATION/TRAINING

Among the most significant possibilities that the new union opens up for us are in the areas of organisation and training. We are a membership based organisation that cannot survive without members. We now have the capacity to link into a team of organisers to assist branches in recruitment and organisation. We need to develop an approach whereby branches in the Civil Service can avail of this facility. One possibility, and something that is common in other parts of the union, is to develop a co-funding model between branches and Head Office so that we can get the benefits that will allow for branches. In addition, we now have the opportunities to develop branch activists through a wider range of training courses to enable activists to grow the necessary skill-sets to carry out their functions effectively.

CONCLUSION

I want to record my thanks to a number of people. First and foremost, by creating this union, we have created something with the enormous potential to improve our members' lives. All who played a part in making this happen deserve thanks and recognition for doing so. It is now up to all of us to realise the potential that we have created.

I want to thank the outgoing Divisional Executive Committee, all 53 of them! It was a somewhat unwieldy edifice born out of necessity but the people concerned worked as hard as they could to make it work. In particular, I would like to thank the two Vice-Chairs., Ann Magee and Kieran Sheehan and the Chairperson, Niall McGuirk, all of whom were a help in welding together the three previous families.

I want to thank my fellow officials, many of whom I have got to know better in recent months, and I want to thank my colleagues in the administrative staff, with particular thanks to Moira Haslam for all the work in putting this conference together.

I want to thank all of you, the activists, for your work on behalf of our members but, above all, I want to thank our members. We never take them for granted and we never forget that this is their organisation and that we are their servants. Personally, I tried to get to a wide range of AGMs and members' meetings and I am grateful for the warmth and friendliness with which I was received.

We are here to do some serious business but while we are here we should avail of the chance to make new friends and to learn from each other, to socialise together and to leave here with a renewed commitment to our common goals.

Thank you.

ENDS