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Looking forward

Pay, inflation and blended working



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National Conference 2022

Looking forward

Pay, inflation and blended working

Fórsa is produced by Fórsa trade union's communications unit and is compiled and edited by Niall Shanahan.

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Together again: delight, pride and sadness

Colleagues,

It's with a genuine sense of delight that I'm making my way back to Killarney for this year's biennial Fórsa conference. Delight, because I'll be back among treasured friends and colleagues from all parts of the union, meeting them face to face and having the chats about conference business and life as we reconnect with each other.

There's a sense of pride too because I know how hard our reps have been working over these past two very challenging years. I'm really looking forward to hearing their contributions from the conference floor as we work together to determine the union's policies for the future.

Members have clearly indicated through their reps and divisional heads just how much the issue of working hours, blended and flexible work will form part of the discussion at conference this year. Fórsa members have been engaged in an enormous and unplanned experiment in different ways of working since the pandemic landed.

The brilliant response of all our members to that experience is an additional source of pride. We can all take ownership of the discussion around new ways of working and provide leadership in a world of work that has utterly changed.

I'm looking forward also to seeing the conference charity cycle arrive in from Limerick as conference opens. Éamonn and Dessie will lead the pack again, while raising money for local charities that don't have large budgets to back the important work they do. The collection buckets will be on site for delegates to donate, and branches can make donations via Fórsa's head office.

And as I make my way to Killarney there will be a sense of sadness too for all the colleagues who won't be there and I'll be thinking about our friend Jerry King.

Held in very high esteem by the three forerunner unions that created Fórsa, Jerry was instrumental in inspiring confidence in that new union project.

Jerry's focus, always, was on what we could do to improve the lives of Fórsa members. He was unstinting in that mission, and adept at winning people over to his vision of how things should be. I will miss his unique voice at this conference.

Suaimhneas síoraí dóibh go léir.



Michael Smyth
Fórsa President

May 2022



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Conference fringe events

Exhibition: Equivalent Grades committees

WHERE? Lobby, INEC

WHEN? Throughout the conference.
Wednesday 18th to Friday 20th May

This year, the Equivalent Grades committees have chosen to showcase their work to date through a conference exhibition. Delegates are encouraged to visit the exhibition and see first-hand how it works, and learn more about what's been achieved so far. Committee members will also be available during conference to answer delegate queries about the committee and how it might be relevant to their respective clerical and executive officer membership.

Tasc webinar series: What might the state look like post-pandemic?

WHERE? Conference hall, INEC

WHEN? Thursday 19th May,
1.15 to 2pm

This event outlines what a transformed or expanded state might look like post-pandemic using a series of case studies. It looks at early years care, eldercare, renewable energy, and higher education reform. Speakers include Fórsa general secretary Kevin Callinan and Tasc director Dr. Shana Cohen. Session moderated by director of campaigns Kevin Donoghue.

TUNUI: The role of trade unions in a changed constitutional future

WHERE? Park Suite, The Brehon Hotel

WHEN? Thursday 19th May,
1.15 to 2pm

Trade Unionists for a New and United Ireland (TUNUI) invites delegates and staff to a fringe meeting to have a discussion on the role of trade unions in a changed constitutional future. Chaired by former IMPACT assistant general secretary Pat Bolger.

Abandoned Archives: The Stories We Can't Tell

WHERE? Munster Suite, The Brehon Hotel

WHEN? Thursday 19th May,
1pm to 2pm

Based on Fórsa-funded research, the union's Archivist branch will explore how the issue of chronic underfunding is affecting the ability of the national archives to reach its full potential. With contributions from Hazel Menton, branch chair.

INSPIRE Alumni Lunch

WHERE? The Brehon Suite, The Brehon Hotel

WHEN? Thursday 19th May,
1.00 to 2pm

The Fórsa Skills Academy is hosting an INSPIRE alumni lunch at the Brehon Hotel. This event is by invitation and will feature speakers Caitriona Gleeson (CEO, Women for Election), Fórsa national secretary Ashley Connolly, and Margaret Coughlan, chair of the ICTU Women's Committee. Contact Linda Kelly, director of Training and Development, if you wish to attend.

Justice for Colombia: Trade unions for human rights and peace in Colombia

WHERE? Park Suite, The Brehon Hotel

WHEN? Friday 20th May,
1.15 to 2pm

Thousands of social leaders, including human rights activists, community organisers and trade unionists, have been killed in recent decades in Colombia and the violence against them continues today. This event provides an update on the Justice for Colombia campaign to date. Speakers include Fórsa general secretary Kevin Callinan and Justice for Colombia director Hasan Dodwell.

Fórsa Youth Network: Enhancing engagement with young workers

WHERE? Munster Suite, The Brehon Hotel

WHEN? Friday 20th May,
1.15 to 2pm

An open discussion held by the Fórsa Youth Network exploring how we can encourage younger members to engage with trade union activism in the workplace and beyond. Open to all members.



Bernard Harbor.

As the World Bank forecasts energy and other commodity prices are likely to remain “historically high” until 2024, BERNARD HARBOR puts the crystal ball to one side and says the union will have to make judgements about where all this is going as we prepare for public service pay talks.

I don't make predictions



Photo: dreamstime.com

I'M PUTTING pen to paper three weeks ahead of the 2022 Fórsa conference in Killarney, and the global economic picture is so uncertain that this article could be out of date by the time you read it.

The morning papers bring reports that Davy stockbrokers has upped its Irish economic growth forecast, making it an outlier when the Central Bank, ESRI and finance

department have recently downgraded theirs.

As virtually every political commentator says since 2016's Trump victory and Brexit vote, I don't make predictions. But Davy's sunny assessment has a Pollyanna feel.

Not least as the World Bank is also forecasting that energy and other commodity prices, which are currently driving inflation, are likely

to remain “historically high” until 2024.

Like I say, we don't make predictions. But the union will have to make judgements about where all this is going as we prepare for public service pay talks rather earlier than we expected at the start of this year (those predictions again!).

Like other countries, Ireland's inflation is at its highest level for

over 20 years, and last year's hopes that prices would quickly stabilise and fall have made their way to the predictions' graveyard.

Nobody expected these high and sustained cost-of-living increases to emerge when *Building Momentum* was negotiated in late 2020, and accepted by huge majorities in ballots of union members shortly afterwards.

That's why the ICTU Public Services Committee (PSC), which represents virtually all unions in the sector, triggered a *Building Momentum* review clause in March.

This was prompted by Fórsa general secretary Kevin Callinan, who told the committee's AGM that sustained high inflation is grounds for a review of the agreement's pay terms, which will see maximum pay increases of just 1.2% this year.

Clause 5.7 of *Building Momentum* says the agreement's pay terms can be reviewed if the assumptions underlying the deal "need to be revisited." It says the parties must engage in such circumstances.

"Modest pay increases were agreed on the understanding that prices would be relatively stable. There must be an adjustment in the pay terms."

Since the clause was triggered, public expenditure minister Michael McGrath has said he will put the issue of public service pay and inflation on a busy Cabinet agenda in early May, and that he then expects talks with unions to get underway.

McGrath acknowledged the impact of price rises on public servants and other workers. He indicated that he favoured a short agreement because of uncertainties in the global economy, but warned of wider economic challenges and said pay alone could not offset the impact of inflation.



"While the various Government measures go a little way to address the effect of the cost-of-living crisis, workers can't be expected to bear the increased cost of living on their own. All employers who can afford it will have to assist with efforts to maintain living standards through the normal bargaining processes" - Kevin Callinan, Fórsa general secretary and ICTU president.

His comments came after Fórsa general secretary Kevin Callinan and other union leaders met senior Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) officials last month for the "prior engagement" required once the *Building Momentum* review clause is triggered.

Speaking to the Irish Independent immediately after the meeting, Kevin said there was an urgent need for measures to be taken "in the form of additional pay increases" to stabilise the agreement.

"While the various Government measures go a little way to address the effect of the cost-of-living crisis, workers can't be expected to bear the increased cost of living on their own. All employers who can afford it will have to assist with efforts to maintain living standards through the normal bargaining processes," he said.

In a related move, ICTU's Private Sector Committee recently increased its targets for private sector pay negotiations in light of soaring living costs.

Fórsa has been warning for months that unexpectedly high inflation

was not a short-term problem. Early in the year the union called for urgent Government action to protect living standards and stabilise the public service agreement, which expires in December.

"When we negotiated Building Momentum, it wasn't the intention of any of the parties - unions or Government - to see public service pay movement so out of step with prices. Modest increases were agreed on the understanding that prices would be relatively stable. There must be an adjustment in the pay terms," said Kevin.

He added that unions also wanted to avoid a 'wage-price spiral' where pay increases start to fuel inflation. *"But we must strike the right balance. We can't end up destroying consumer confidence and affecting jobs and exchequer returns unintentionally," he said.*

"Unions want to avoid a 'wage-price spiral' where pay increases start to fuel inflation. But we must strike the right balance."

That chimes with later comments from the World Bank's vice president Indermit Gill. Speaking after his institution issued its April prediction of up to three years of high inflation, he urged Governments to "take every opportunity to increase economic growth at home and avoid actions that will bring harm to the global economy."

This sounds like a warning not to take the austerity route that led to cuts in pay and public services during the global recession triggered by the 2008 banking crisis.

The Irish, European and broader response to the economic challenge of the recent pandemic suggests that Governments will be inclined to take Gill's advice. But that's not a prediction ■



Niall Shanahan.

In the run up to Fórsa's first fully in-person conference since 2018, branches and divisions have been taking the opportunity to gather again to plan and prepare for the challenges ahead. NIALL SHANAHAN spoke to Services and Enterprises national secretary Katie Morgan, and divisional cathaoirleach Niall Mullally about the division's recent strategy session.

A chance to refocus



Photo: Niall Shanahan

"WE HOSTED a strategy day in Athlone in mid-April where we had an opportunity to focus on embedding organising and Fórsa's strategic plan into our divisional strategy," says Katie Morgan, head of Fórsa's Services and Enterprises division. The strategy day took place in Athlone and provided an opportunity for workplace representatives and branch committee members to meet and exchange ideas in person for the first time in more than two years.

"The day included workshops by Fórsa's strategic organising director Orlagh Fawl (see page 18) and we had presentations from the union's strategic change team and communications unit, while general secretary Kevin Callinan provided an overview of the current challenges nationally for the union and the wider trade union movement," she adds.

Katie and divisional cathaoirleach Niall Mullally said the strategy session provided a much-needed opportunity to re-energise as a group, and to refocus the work of the division after two long years of conference calls and uncertainty.

Fórsa strategic objectives:

1. Organising to create a stronger, more powerful union
2. Delivering for members
3. Campaigning and influencing
4. Building an efficient and effective union
5. Futureproofing Fórsa for the challenges ahead

"We've seen the benefits of blended and remote working, and we were able to continue working productively as a division throughout the pandemic period.

But there's a little added energy and focus, and some excitement, from being able to meet face to face again," says Niall.

On the centrepiece of the strategy day, Fórsa's strategic plan, Katie and Niall emphasised the need to better deliver for members and increase union power: "We need to have a more strategic approach and increase our density. We're looking forward to engaging branches and members on this and reporting some positive outcomes at our next conference," says Katie.

"It was agreed that our initial focus will be to meet Fórsa's strategic objective to organise to create a stronger, more powerful union. We're planning a pilot project and looking to develop a fresh communications strategy to improve communications with members and potential members," she says ■

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Linda Kelly.

In-person training for Fórsa member activists is back, and the Fórsa Skills Academy was officially launched, following a Covid-induced hiatus, in September 2021. Training director LINDA KELLY writes about this new hub for all the union's training and development offerings to members, and the response of members as they return to union training opportunities.

Back in the groove



Tailored skills training for every Fórsa representative

THE UNION'S Skills Academy was established following a review of the training and development programmes that existed at the time of the amalgamation of unions that created Fórsa. In addition to creating the Fórsa Skills Academy, the review also recommended a restructuring of all training programmes, and the introduction of two new training courses.

These new courses, *Fórsa 101* and *Branch Executive Committee 101*, have been hugely popular with new and emerging workplace reps since they were launched at the end of 2021. Close to 200 workplace reps applied to attend the first courses. The purpose of these

“Overall, I found the training to be both useful and informative. I definitely have a better understanding of what is expected of me in my role as a Union Representative.”

Quote from training participant of BEC 101.

courses is to de-mystify the work of the union and local branch executive committees.

The *Fórsa 101* course will run again in June this year for new workplace reps and our *Branch Executive Committee 101* course will run again in November, coinciding with the opening of nominations for branch executive committee elections.

Despite the challenges of providing simultaneous remote and in-person training options, and the continuing disruption and uncertainty caused by Covid-19, more than 100 Fórsa workplace reps are currently attending our workplace representative training. This course - the centrepiece of the Skills Academy offering - gives representative a skills and

knowledge base in five key areas: organising, communication, health and safety, equality and diversity and industrial relations.

Applications will open in summer 2022 for the autumn intake into the Workplace Representative Training.

“As a rep for a long time I would have found this training very helpful, I would encourage all branches to take part.”

In addition to these courses, we’ve also completed our annual branch officer training courses. These courses are specific to the different roles on Fórsa branch executive committees, and offer an introduction to the role, and an opportunity to get to know other branch officers. We were delighted this year to welcome more than 200 branch officers to the training, which took place in-person and online.

“The training was very good. I have never done online training before and found it just as good as being in Dublin. I feel that is the way to go for the future for Fórsa and for online meetings too. The course gave every opportunity to ask questions and it was great to get the feedback and experiences of other Fórsa officials and reps.”

Ahead of conference this year we put a lot of work into developing training for principal delegates to conference, including a session for new delegates which was also open to returning delegates to attend if they wanted some refresher training. After all, it had been a



Photo: Carol McSherry (SNA)



Despite the challenges of providing simultaneous remote and in-person training options, and the continuing disruption and uncertainty caused by Covid-19, more than 100 Fórsa workplace reps are currently attending our workplace representative training.

while since any of us attend a biennial conference in person!

In the post-conference period we'll be turning our attention to the roll-out of advanced courses for the autumn. These new courses will focus on a number of different areas like leadership, employment law, and political economy (to name a few), and will be open to branch officers and senior activists to attend.

“The INSPIRE training is fantastic and I found that it really builds confidence in oneself.”

One of the long-running courses at advanced level is our annual INSPIRE training which we run in

conjunction with Women for Election. The aim of the INPSIRE programme is to encourage women activists to get more involved in the senior decision-making structures of the organisation.

“Great course – empowering and confidence building and good follow through with questions that were posed.”

Now in its sixth year, the programme has been very successful. Four of the six current divisional Cathaoirleach are past participants ■

For more information on Skills Academy courses, and to download a copy of the Skills Academy brochure, please visit forsa.ie/skills-academy/



Mehak Dugal.

The recent Census time capsule provided us all with an opportunity to send a message to future generations. It prompted a massive response from Irish people concerned that there would be an audience for their message in a century's time. MEHAK DUGAL looks at the current anxiety around climate change, the need to take action, and the good news on the horizon.

Tell the kids what happened

A CENSUS enumerator stopped by my front door to hand me this year's form. She drew my attention to the new feature in this year's form, the 'Time Capsule'. I was told that I could put down whatever I wanted within that box and this message would be released in 100 years. She said it was so exciting to think our great-grandchildren could be reading words left behind by us, at which moment both of us looked up simultaneously and each of us, in our own way, said "Well, if anyone's still around."

"It takes a year for people in developing countries to burn through what some in developed nations burn through in just nine days."

Both in our twenties, we delivered our observations with characteristically nihilistic 'Gen Z' humour, joking about how neither ourselves, the census message capsule, nor the planet might survive long enough to carry on our words. Nevertheless, we both knew there was a harrowing truth beneath the humour.

With everyone struggling to keep up with and absorb the latest pandemic news, or the horrible news from Ukraine, it feels like



Photo: Markus Spiske

we've collectively pushed - to the very back of our minds - a catastrophic global concern slowly creeping in the background. And that is climate change.

Suffering

"An atlas of human suffering" is how the United Nations' general secretary described the most recent report by the

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the UN body for assessing the science related to climate change.

While past reports looked at how bad the effects of climate change would be in the future, this time the report told us just how bad the effects are now.

One of the most distressing figures from the report stated that almost half the world's population live on a

continent that is highly vulnerable to climate catastrophe. Vulnerable regions face a threat of 15 times higher mortality from natural disasters such as floods, storms and droughts. Low-lying islands and coastal cities are specifically vulnerable.

Currently, the report predicts we are witnessing global temperatures 1.3°C higher than the pre-industrial levels, pushing some natural systems to their limit to adapt. Some ecosystems simply cannot carry on. Human nature views everything through the lens of self-preservation, and at some point, it will be too much for us too.

We need to limit global warming to 1.5°C. Without immediate emission reductions across all sectors and a combined effort by all, this will be impossible.

Wealth

It takes a year for people in developing countries to burn through what some in developed nations burn through in just nine days, while the wealthiest 1% account for more than twice the combined share of emissions of the poorest 50%. The super-rich need to cut their carbon output, and a greater burden of responsibility must be on the big polluters.

People are overwhelmed, oscillating between climate anxiety and pushing it to the back of our minds. But individuals can make helpful choices, and people should be empowered to choose action. For example, if short-haul flights remain more affordable than buses and trains crippled by lack of investment in public transport infrastructure, individuals are denied the autonomy to make better choices.

The good news!

An increasing number of innovative policies and laws have enhanced energy efficiency which in turn allowed us to accelerate the deployment of renewable energy. Since 2010, there has been



Photo: Marcin Jozwick

sustained decreases of up to 85% in the cost of solar and wind energy, and batteries. The shift to a greener economy is happening, and couldn't be timelier.

At the peak of Covid restrictions globally, the natural world got a break like never before. Road traffic fell to levels not seen in decades, flights halved and carbon emissions saw a decline due to reduced industrial activity. The Guardian even reported that at one point, so light was humankind's touch on the Earth during this time, seismologists were able to detect lower vibrations from "cultural noise" than before the pandemic.

Despite everything that happened, the pandemic did allow us to see, just for a brief moment, what a greener economy might look like.

Political will and investment is essential. Russia's illegal war in Ukraine has also prioritised a rapid drive to sustainable energy in order to reduce dependency on Russian oil and gas.

Union action

Unions in Ireland and abroad have strongly backed moves towards a carbon-free economy in response to the climate crisis. But we have stressed time and again that workers and communities most affected by the transition should be protected as part of the process. Workers and communities at-risk from the transition should

We need to limit global warming to 1.5°C. An increasing number of innovative policies and laws have enhanced energy efficiency which in turn allowed us to accelerate the deployment of renewable energy.

not disproportionately shoulder the burden of adjustment. Aligning skills, resources and work requirements moving forward allows us to transition efficiently without the loss of jobs and communities.

The Just Transition Alliance an ICTU initiative that includes Fórsa, Siptu, Friends of the Earth and TASC, aims to work with like-minded organisations to put the internationally-supported 'just transition' model at the centre of Ireland's official response to the climate crisis. It's calling on the Government to immediately establish a commission of representatives of Government, trade unions, employers, affected communities and civil society, to inform proposals for an economy-wide framework for a just transition.

The Government's 2021 Climate Action plan includes a commitment to create a national just transition commission, but it's not scheduled to be in place before mid-2023. Let's just hope it's not too late.

A quick and efficient transition to sustainable energy production is our only chance at halving emissions before 2030. Least so our census messages have a chance of reaching an audience in the future ■



Roisin McKane.



Mark Corcoran.

MARK CORCORAN and ROISIN McKANE spoke to Fórsa's heads of division about what's on the agenda for the first fully in-person conference in more than two years and about how it shapes the union's work beyond conference.

To conference and beyond

Education



Andy Pike.

The division has grown over the last three years to exceed 16,500 members, including 12,000 SNA members. We aim to develop our membership to at least 18,000 by May

2023. Fórsa has secured an agreement to place school secretaries on the public service pay scale and we'll soon start talks on a new national contract for SNAs, including a review of the controversial '72 hours'. We want those hours abolished.

We'll also start negotiations on a new pay deal for school caretakers, testing will start shortly on the new job evaluation scheme in higher education, and consultation on the future of the School Completion Programme should commence shortly, following the successful national symposium held at the end of March.

Civil Service



Derek Mullen.

The return to an in-person conference is very welcome, it provides the best opportunity for discussion and collaboration, and our division is looking forward to debating

key issues like pay, pensions and sick leave. The clear emphasis is on pay and forthcoming talks given the cost-of-living pressures on all our members.

Some motions on blended or remote working have been somewhat overtaken by the

recently agreed blended work framework. We've a motion seeking engagement with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform regarding a standardised allowance or vouched expenses to cover the cost of appropriate equipment needed for working from home.

Sick leave is also on the agenda, including a motion that post-natal depression be considered as a pregnancy-related illness, while another seeks pension recognition of time spent work-sharing for caring reasons.

Health & Welfare



Éamonn Donnelly.

It feels real again to be back at conference in person. The trade union movement is a people-centred entity and there's no substitute for meeting people again. It's widely

accepted that our health service's response to the pandemic was phenomenal. Massive staff redeployment played a key role and our elected representatives and Fórsa staff played a huge role assisting in the biggest mobilisation of the workforce seen for decades.

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that we can't continue to over-rely on acute hospitals to deliver healthcare. Now we're at an advanced stage in accelerating the community model of healthcare.

Ways of working will change, particularly in terms of blended working models. Health workers should be able to avail of new arrangements where it's feasible, we'll continue to advocate for a

blended working model in the near future.

Local Government

Remote and blended working



Dessie Robinson.

policies are high on the agenda for the local government and local services division. We need employers to fully engage with remote and blended work and think flexibly, members have

proved conclusively that it can be done.

I'm really looking forward to getting back to robust live debate and meeting our comrades in person this year. The energy in the room and the enthusiasm for conference business, you can't beat it.

Services & Enterprises



Katie Morgan.

Organising has been established as the union's top priority under Fórsa's strategic plan, and organising is central to providing a work plan for the next twelve months. The

aim is to create a stronger, more powerful union, and a pilot project will be outlined for this. Some of the branch motions deal with pay, improving conditions and domestic violence leave. Our members are calling on the union to negotiate realistic pay increases to reflect the rise in the cost of living, and the lifting of caps on pay scale roles that are affecting the pay progression opportunities of some of our members.

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Laura Bambrick.

Ireland has one of the lowest rates of working mothers in the EU27, while the State remains absent from childcare despite having the youngest population in the EU. ICTU's Head of Social Policy & Employment Affairs LAURA BAMBRICK writes that the only way to guarantee accessible and affordable childcare for families, and decent pay and conditions for workers, is for the State to recognise childcare as an essential public service for which it's primarily responsible for delivering and resourcing.

The State's hands-off approach to childcare must end

ALL EUROPEAN welfare systems were originally built around the assumption that women are full-time caregivers in the home while men earned a wage adequate to support the family.

From the 1950s onwards, this male-breadwinner model of work and family life began to be replaced by social policies that facilitated women as well as men to work outside the home.

"In Denmark, Finland and Sweden access to full-time care is guaranteed to all children aged one year or younger."

Ireland is unusual in that this shift in official thinking began much later and gender stereotypes remain today. Nowhere is this more visible than in the State's hands-off approach to childcare.

In all other rich EU countries childcare is considered an essential public service. In Denmark, Finland

and Sweden access to full-time care is guaranteed to all children aged one year or younger. A similar right exists in Germany, but State-run centres closing at lunchtime is common, making full-time employment difficult for mothers. In Austria, Belgium and France public childcare is available for the year or two before children start primary school. In Ireland, where private for-profit businesses provide the majority of childcare facilities, there is no legal right to a childcare place.

However, the right to access childcare doesn't automatically guarantee it is affordable for parents.

While all member states offer some support to reduce childcare fees, there is wide variation in the generosity of this support and the resulting out-of-pocket expense for parents.

In eight of the EU27 member states, free or low-cost publicly provided childcare is available for all children, irrespective of how much their parents earn or the

family type. More typically, childcare subsidises are more generous for low-income, lone-parents and migrant families.

In Ireland, during the Celtic Tiger years, a fourfold increase in Child Benefit was used as a vehicle to help working parents with childcare costs in a way that ensured families caring for children in the home would equally benefit from social spending.

"The cost of childcare for parents in Ireland remains the most expensive in the EU."

More recently, a new National Childcare Scheme, launched in November 2019, provides universal (paid to all) and top-up targeted (must meet certain criteria) subsidies for all children aged between 24 weeks and 15 years, using a registered childcare provider. This new scheme is a landmark in Irish social policy development in giving parents a



Photo: dreamstime.com

right to financial support for childcare fees for the first time.

Notwithstanding, the cost of childcare for parents in Ireland remains the most expensive in the EU. An average working couple spends 20% of their joint income on full-time fees for two pre-school children. This is a bigger share of the family budget than is typically spent on housing costs (15.7%).

“The crisis in childcare is not a niche issue, and the market has failed.”

As a result, Ireland has one of the lowest rates of working mothers in the EU27 alongside Italy, Greece and Spain where a third of women aged 25-54 with children are outside the workforce.

One of the main contributing factors to our crippling cost of childcare is that, unusually, fees are not subject to any regulation by the

State nor are costs capped for parents in Ireland.

Business owners point to underinvestment by government. Funding is comparatively very low and markedly below the UNICEF recommended benchmark of investing at least 1% of GDP in early years childcare. However, the Parliamentary Budget Office notes it is not clear what effect the significant increased funding over the last decade has had on costs for parents.

At the same time, professionally qualified staff in the sector continue to be some of the lowest paid workers in the economy and paid far less than their EU counterparts. This is a longstanding fact, only acknowledged by Government in the past year with a commitment to introducing agreed minimum terms and conditions for the sector’s 30,000 female workforce.

It beggars belief that the State’s continued absence from childcare is happening against the backdrop of having the youngest population in the EU. The crisis in childcare is not a niche issue.

“Professionally qualified staff in the sector continue to be some of the lowest paid workers in the economy and paid far less than their EU counterparts.”

The market has failed. The State must recognise childcare as an essential public service for which they are primarily responsible for delivering and resourcing. It’s the European way. It’s the only way to guarantee accessible and affordable childcare for families and decent pay and conditions for workers ■

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Bernard Harbor.

Following the radical pandemic experience of new ways of working, many workers don't want to go back to old working arrangements. BERNARD HARBOR says there's now a huge appetite for remote or blended working arrangements.

Read more about the developments and public debate around reduced working time and flexible employment arrangements at forsa.ie

Someone shouted 'stop'

THE NUMBER of 'staff wanted' signs in the windows of city centre shops and restaurants these days has become reminiscent of the Celtic Tiger era. I've even seen bar staff wearing 'we're hiring' tee-shirts, and job opportunity leaflets placed prominently beside café menus.

This tightening labour market - here and abroad - is both a cause and effect of the so-called 'great resignation', the post-pandemic phenomenon that's seen workers changing jobs or leaving the workforce in droves.

Many employees were forced to stop working in the early months of the Covid emergency. Others experienced radical changes in work organisation. For most, this meant spending more time at home and less time in the workplace.

In March 2020, when governments shouted 'stop', we were forced to step back and think about our working arrangements, life priorities, and the balance between the two. Lots of us concluded that the balance was out of kilter.

Meanwhile, labour market pressures are forcing employers to respond to demands for more flexibility, particularly (though not exclusively) when competing for in-demand professionals.

In the public service, where Fórsa's leadership has seen a resolution to the longstanding Haddington Road



Illustration: dreamstime.com

hours issue, the appetite for improved work flexibility is reflected in a huge appetite for remote or blended working arrangements.

Fórsa was first off the blocks with its July 2020 membership survey, which revealed that over 80% of workers favoured a blended working arrangement. Since then, scores of studies have come up with similar results.

The union subsequently placed huge import on the issue, working with ICTU to lobby for improved legislation on the right to request remote work, negotiating with employers for decent local arrangements, and - most importantly - delivering a civil service framework, which is now being rolled out in organisations across the public service.

While there has been some cooling of employer attitudes in recent

months, the successful forced experiment of the early pandemic has demonstrated that remote working is productive and popular. It's going to be a permanent feature of work organisation.

More broadly, as the Fórsa-led four-day week campaign gathers pace, and on foot of an EU directive that Ireland must implement by the summer, the cabinet recently backed new legislation that will give parents of under-12s and carers the right to request flexible working hours. As well as helping workers achieve better balance in their lives, these and other measures can help make the labour market more attractive to more people.

In any case, reduced working time and flexible employment arrangements are set to stay high on Fórsa's list of things to do ■



Orlagh Fawl.

In 2020, FÓRSA introduced a strategic organising model in sections of the FÓRSA divisional and membership network. FÓRSA's director of strategic organising ORLAGH FAWL writes about how the strategic organising approach creates influence and builds power in the workplace, and how it builds a plan to win for FÓRSA members.

Building power, creating influence

IF ORGANISING is about building power, what is strategic organising? Simply put, it's about union members creating influence and building power through their employments. More than that, it's about doing this in a very focused way which enables activists to build a plan to win. It's a methodical approach that all branches and sections can utilise, and where branches and groups of FÓRSA members have engaged with the process of strategic organising, they have seen results.

FÓRSA's Strategic Organising department has implemented a project-based approach to this work, providing a specialised resource to support the union's divisions and, in a limited number of cases, to specific branches. We began in a number of targeted areas throughout the FÓRSA network, creating opportunities for proactive membership engagement, issue consolidation and the development of appropriate strategies to advance agreed objectives.

It's worth noting that this model was rolled out during the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite the additional challenges presented by the pandemic, we've seen positive results in terms of consistent membership density and the growth of union leadership in the

targeted employments. It's also created opportunities to tackle issues of concern in the workplace.

"We know from experience that where strategic organising is applied, we see significant union activation and participation at ground level, consistent improvements in membership density, leadership and communications, as well as increased union leverage on matters that are important to FÓRSA members."

Like all good things, positive results can take time, but with the right tools and guidance it is absolutely possible.

Equivalent grades and 'It's About Time'

A good example of how the strategic organising approach has been effective in FÓRSA is the work of the Equivalent Grades committee. Formed under rule upon the formation of FÓRSA, the committee is made up of clerical

and executive officer grades (3 to 7) from across all divisions of the union, and convenes quarterly to identify and discuss issues that are relevant to all concerned at the appropriate grades.

This proactive forum has facilitated the role out of several strategic organising and leverage strategies that are championed by the members of the various committees and disseminated through their membership networks.

To date, this issue-based approach has focused on core matters like pay, working hours and leave. This led to the creation of the interactive *It's About Time* strategy, focusing directly on the restoration of pre-Haddington Road working hours. This had a direct influence on FÓRSA's policy at national level, while continuing to address other workplace issues of concern to clerical and executive officer grades across our union.

At this year's biennial delegate conference in Killarney, the Equivalent Grades Committees have chosen to showcase their work to date through a conference exhibition. We're encouraging conference delegates to visit the exhibition and see first-hand how it works, and learn more about what's been achieved so far.



Photo: Dornick Walsh

Members of the Equivalent Grades committee will also be available during conference to answer delegate queries about the committee and how it might be relevant to their respective clerical and executive officer membership.

“Strategic organising is labour intensive, but the investment in the process by the union, through the utilisation of a specialised group of staff, is only possible with the support and expertise of the union’s activist and representative structure.”

If you get the opportunity to engage with members of the Equivalent Grades Committees at

The issue-based approach has focused on core matters like pay, working hours and leave, including the creation of the interactive *It’s About Time* strategy, focusing directly on the restoration of pre-Haddington Road working hours. Delegates showed their support for the *It’s About Time* strategy at last year’s Consultative Council in Killarney.

conference, or elsewhere, please seize the opportunity as they are a proactive bunch who are striving to build their union in the interests of all clerical and executive officers’ members, current and future.

The work and advancement of strategic organising will continue to broaden its scope in line with the central organisational objectives of Fórsa. We know from experience that where the model is applied, we see significant union activation and participation at ground level, consistent improvements in

membership density, leadership and communications, as well as increased union leverage on matters that are important to Fórsa members.

Strategic organising is labour intensive, but the investment in the process by the union, through the utilisation of a specialised group of staff, is only possible with the support and expertise of the union’s activist and representative structure through all levels of the organisation, as well as divisional support ■

If you or your branch would like to learn more about some of the basics of this approach, please contact us via the Fórsa website at forsa.ie/contact/.



Niall Shanahan.

“We will fight and we will win” - community protest rally



Photo: Niall Shanahan

FÓRSA MEMBERS in the community and voluntary sector were told that it was time Government ministers showed them the respect they deserved after 14 years without any improvements in pay.

Addressing the 3rd May multi-union rally of community and voluntary sector members, Fórsa official Catherine Keogh said fine words and promises from Government ministers was not enough: “Ministers will meet with union officials and give us fine words about how our members are doing great work providing disability services, and say ‘we’ll make sure to do something,’ but they do nothing. It is sickening, it is wrong, and it has to end,” she said.

Catherine described 14 years without pay improvement in the community and voluntary sector as shocking and abhorrent: “I’m using strong language because I feel strongly. You’re working the hardest jobs in this country, with no

Roisín Coffey-Duff, Chris Cully, Pádraig Mulligan, Dublin Lord Mayor Alison Gilliland, Lynn Coffey and Catherine Keogh at the ‘Valuing Community’ rally on 3rd May.

respect. Somebody needs to give you respect, and we’re going to get it for you.

“You shouldn’t have to take to the streets and take strike action, and I hope I never have to see you out on the streets again, unless it’s to celebrate you getting a pay rise. We will fight and we will win for you,” she said.

Hundreds joined the national day of protest in response to what unions describe as the “neglect and underfunding” of community sector services. Siptu official Adrian Kane told the rally that, in the absence of a political response, Congress would consider a series of work stoppages across the community and voluntary sector.

The ‘Valuing Care Valuing Community’ protest marked the commencement of a national campaign, which will include industrial action aimed at ending

the State’s neglect of the community and voluntary sector, and highlight the need for better pay and respect of their roles.

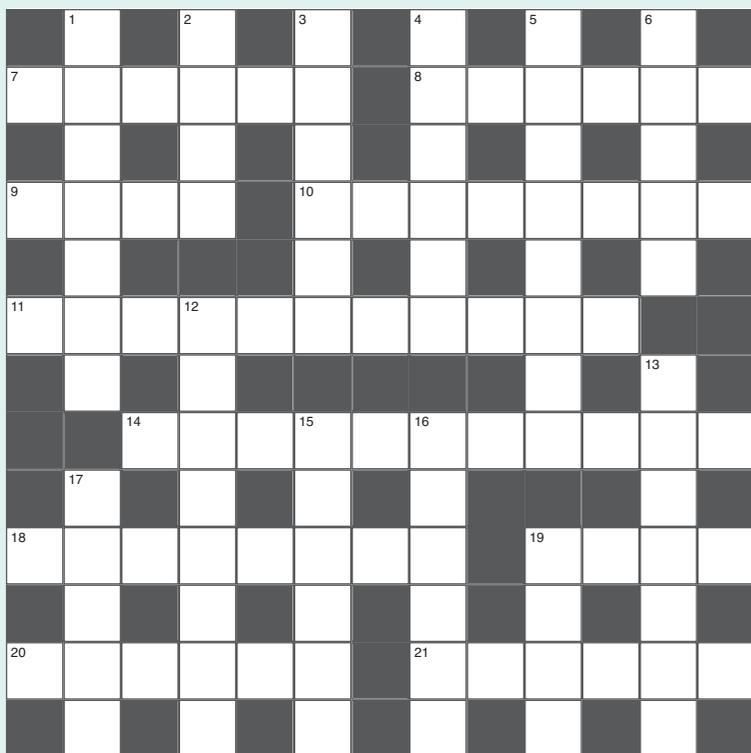
Fórsa published a report last September which identified very high annual staff exit rates by health and social care professionals from agencies funded by the HSE. The rate of departure is up to 33% annually, and this has led, inevitably, to a decline in delivery.

“In many cases community sector and Section 39 organisation workers are poorly paid, have poor or no pension provision and lack security of employment. This is despite providing important health and social services to the most disadvantaged and vulnerable members of our society. The only realistic solution is to rebuild and refinance the voluntary and community sector with a more sustainable and appropriate funding model,” she said ■

WIN €50

PRIZE CROSSWORD

Win €50 by completing the crossword and sending your entry, name and address to Mark Corcoran, Fórsa crossword, Fórsa, Nerney's Court, Dublin, D01 R2C5, by Friday 1st July 2022. We'll send €50 to the first correct entry pulled from the hat.



Crossword composed by Peter Connaughton.

ACROSS

7. A nappy in the U.S (6)
8. And 21 across - Scottish DJ and producer, born Adam Richard Wiles (6)
9. He became the first Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland in 1801 (4)
10. Margaret Hilda Roberts (8)
11. Director of *Get Out* and *Us* (6,5)
14. Main man in Paradise (11)
18. Conurbation in NE England - Includes Newcastle and Gateshead (8)
19. This on the double, replaces applause in the House of Commons (4)
20. A tiny period of time? (6)
21. See 8 Across (6)

DOWN

1. Chemical element and valley in the Bay area (7)
2. Expectorate (4)
3. Native of Brittany (6)
4. In music, a series of eight notes occupying the interval between (and including) two notes (6)
5. Bacterial disease of livestock and potatoes (8)
6. Hepatitis causes disease in this organ (5)
12. The first section of the small intestine (8)
13. It is commonly called the North Star or Pole Star (7)
15. Taiwan's capital city (6)
16. They could be born in Brno or Ostrava (6)
17. Middle Eastern state - Capital Damascus (5)
19. Joe plays under 14 across (4)

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- Spouses or qualifying partners qualify for death benefit too
- Evacuation or repatriation expenses of up to €250,000 for members who die or are seriously ill abroad
- Free legal help in bodily injury cases
- Free 24/7 legal advice helpline
- Free 24/7 confidential counselling helpline
- Free 24/7 domestic assistance helpline.

Members can opt in to Fórsa-facilitated financial benefits

- Car insurance
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- Travel insurance
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- Salary protection and life cover.

*Six months continuous membership is required to avail of services. Financial benefits are strictly subject to policy, terms, conditions and exclusions. See www.forsa.ie for details.

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