

EDUCATION DIVISION

FORSA



REPORT
2021-2023

Contents

Organisation.....3	Incomes9
Leadership and organisation3	Public service pay9
Gaining traction3	School secretaries10
Elected leadership3	Collective bargaining.....11
Fórsa staff3	'Haddington Road' working hours11
Seconded staff4	Social dialogue.....12
	Childcare12
	Statutory sick pay12
	Travel and subsistence13
	A social wage13
	Domestic violence leave.....13
	Work Life Balance Bill13
Divisional industrial strategy5	Communications14
Securing a pay agreement for school secretaries5	Media relations14
Increasing pay for SNAs at the top of their pay-scale through the use of sectoral bargaining5	Membership communications14
Commencing a pay campaign for school caretakers5	Digital strategy15
Negotiating a new SNA contract6	Campaigns unit15
Use of 32-hour contracts for SNAs6	Stop the Stigma16
Abolishing the '72-hour' and June working obligations for SNAs6	Ireland for all.....16
Securing a new appropriate accredited entry qualification for SNAs6	
Negotiating a new funding and governance structure for School Completion Programmes6	Training, development and organising.....17
Implementing a new job evaluation scheme in higher education6	Skills Academy Training17
	Strategic organising18
Other developments7	Strategic Change Project19
Bereavement leave7	Branch supports, development and Membership Engagement Project19
SNA allocation model.....7	SOLAS19
Kathleen O'Doherty, an appreciation7	Fórsa's Join Online Project19
SNA training accreditation.....7	Strategic Plan Implementation Board.....19
Blog: membership milestone8	
	Appendices20
	Appendix 1: Education pay scale circulars ..20

Organisation

Leadership and organisation

Throughout 2022 and 2023, Fórsa members working in the Education division have continued to deal with the aftermath of the Covid-19 Pandemic. In higher education, students have now returned to a predominantly in-person model of learning as have students studying courses within Education and Training Boards (ETBs). Members working in the schools sector continue to provide in-person support to students whilst maintaining recommended Covid-19 mitigation measures.

Divisional priorities over the last two years have been to increase bargaining strength and influence through maximising the recruitment of new members and strengthening branch capacity. This objective has been successful in raising the profile of the grades, groups and categories of members within the division and has delivered beneficial outcomes that would not have been achievable without significant membership growth.

Gaining traction

During the period under review, the Education division continued to gain ground and consolidated Fórsa's position as the leading union and the authoritative voice for non-teaching staff across the education sector. Divisional membership grew from 15,100 in February 2021 to 17,900 in March 2023. Since our last in-person divisional conference in 2019 the Education division has grown by just over 50%. This represents significant and sustained growth with the greatest gains being made in recruiting school secretaries, SNAs and higher education staff.

This membership growth is set to continue through the establishment of the national School Caretaker branch and other significant developments across the division. The continued development of the Education division should result in a membership figure approaching 20,000 by the time of the next divisional conference in April 2025.

Elected leadership

Although the two-year term under review saw changes in the composition of the Education DEC, this did not disrupt continuity or the focus of the leadership team in progressing the union's agenda. At the 2021 conference Noreen O'Mahony (Munster SNA branch) was re-elected as Cathaoirleach. Eilise McGarrell (Connaught Ulster SNA branch) was elected as Leas Cathaoirleach, and Kathleen O'Doherty (School Secretaries branch) was re-elected to the third divisional seat on the national executive committee (NEC). The other members elected to the divisional executive committee were Breda Halley (Education No.1 branch), Cáit Ní Mhurchú (School Completion Programme), Anne-Marie Melia (SNA North Leinster branch), Claudia Rattigan (SNA Connaught/Ulster branch), Joan Regan (NETB branch), Annette Murphy (South Leinster SNA branch), Ursula Cox (Higher Education branch) and Helen Hogan (Munster SNA branch). In June 2022 James Kavanagh replaced Cáit Ní Mhurchú as the delegate from the School Completion branch.

Fórsa staff

Andy Pike continues in the post of Head of the Education division, assistant general secretary Stella Griffin works with the NETB, Higher Education, School Completion Programme, and the Education No.1 branches. Assistant general secretary Shane Lambert is responsible for the four SNA branches, the School Caretakers branch and the School Secretaries branch. In 2022, Gary Honer replaced Liz Fay as the Industrial Relations Officer with the Munster SNA branch and the South Leinster SNA branch. Dave Sexton is the IRO working with the Connaught/Ulster SNA branch and the North Leinster SNA branch. Both Gary and Dave also support the School Secretaries branch and the new School Caretakers branch.

The role of organisers is crucial to the work of the division. Their duties relate to recruitment, organisation and local representation of members. The four posts involve assignments with schools' branches. There were a number of changes between 2021 and 2023. Dylan Archbold replaced Michael Kerrigan (North Dublin and North Leinster), Seamus Ryan now supports the Connaught Ulster branch whilst Diarmaid Mac Abhaird supports the South Dublin South Leinster branch while Joan McCrohan continues in her assignment in Munster.

Seconded staff

The division's capacity was strengthened significantly by the release of activists for union-related work. While the individual Fórsa members continue to be employed by their respective employers, they have been assigned to work on behalf of the union in relation to specific projects. Joan Regan of the NETB branch continues in her role in relation to the improvement of information sharing and communication in the education and training sector, in the light of the ongoing changes taking place.

Gina O'Brien and Ben Slim of the Higher Education branch continue on release as facilitators working on behalf of members within the Munster Technological University (MTU) consortium. Sarah Clarke and David Jackman are assigned to similar roles within the Technical University South-East Ireland (TUSEI.) John Doyle and Katie Bourke are assigned as Facilitators in Technological University Shannon (TUS) whilst Ursula Cox and Linda McGlinchy are assigned to facilitator roles within the Atlantic Technological University (ATU).

These arrangements demonstrate a significant degree of management recognition and respect for the role of Fórsa local representatives in the sector, and all our seconded members have undertaken vital work representing the interests of union members affected by the creation of new technological universities.

Divisional industrial strategy

The Education Division Executive Committee (DEC) continued its approach of dividing agenda items under the headings of organising, policy and industrial relations. The committee regularly takes stock of divisional conference resolutions and receives presentations from staff and organisers working in the division outlining their plans.

The divisional industrial strategy forms the basis of work in the division and seeks to implement the relevant sections of the Fórsa Strategic Plan. This is a process requiring the identification of bargaining objectives, aligning activity with those objectives and maximising branch and member involvement in such activity designed to achieve improvements to pay, conditions of employment, status, influence and branch effectiveness.

The division reviews membership levels each month and agreed several membership targets for the division between 2021 and 2023, all of which have been exceeded.

From 2021 to 2023 the divisional strategy included the following objectives and outcomes:

1 Securing a pay agreement for school secretaries

Following a campaign of industrial action from 2020, a new national pay agreement was secured for grant paid school secretaries in March 2022 with benefits backdated to September 2021. Staff are currently being added to the Department of Education payroll system and, as of 14th September, will be paid centrally, as are public servants. The benefits of the pay agreement have delivered significant pay increases and a new incremental scale which mirrors the clerical officer pay scale. Back pay will be delivered to members in advance of September 2023.

Secretaries have, for the first time, been on full pay throughout weeks of school closures in this school year and will be paid full salary during the Easter school holiday, thus ending the practice of secretaries being compelled to sign-on and claim job seekers benefit. Discussions continue on the average salary arrangements that will ensure secretaries are not forced to sign-on during weeks in the summer when schools are closed.

2 Increasing pay for SNAs at the top of their pay-scale through the use of sectoral bargaining

Fórsa successfully utilised the sectoral bargaining clause in the Building Momentum pay agreement to increase pay at the top of the SNA payscale by €1,100, as of February 2022. This was achieved through increasing the maximum salary on the long service increment, a development which, for the first time, resulted in the maximum SNA salary exceeding that of clerical officers. Members were asked for their views on this proposal and voted to accept the sectoral bargaining agreement.

3 Commencing a pay campaign for school caretakers

A framework agreement for school caretakers was concluded in March 2022. Negotiations continue to focus on collecting pay data to enable the Department of Education and Fórsa to conclude discussions on a similar pay agreement to school secretaries. This will be finalised by September 2023.

4 Negotiating a new SNA contract

The commitment to review the 2005 national SNA contract, and the use of the '72 hours', were set out in the Building Momentum pay agreement. Talks are ongoing and must be concluded by September 2023 for the start of the next school year.

5 Use of 32-hour contracts for SNAs

In March 2023, a new SNA job-sharing circular was agreed, removing reference to a 32-hour working week for SNAs. While substitute SNAs are still paid using a 32-hour pay divisor, job sharers will no longer be required to work a 16-hour week. They will work 50% of the full-time hours and be paid 50% of their full-time salary. This will bring an end to attempts by school employers to impose a 32-hour week on SNAs who would normally work on a 'bell-to-bell' basis.

6 Abolishing the '72-hour' and June working obligations for SNAs

Negotiations have commenced on the Fórsa claims for the abolition of these obligations. The union is seeking a new dispensation, based on continuous professional training and development, with any additional work requirements outside of class being strictly and solely related to the needs of SEN students.

7 Securing a new appropriate accredited entry qualification for SNAs

Throughout 2021 and 2022, the "Respect for SNAs" campaign sought changes to the framework of SNA qualifications, and to modernise the entry qualification from the out-dated requirement for only three 'D' grade passes in the Junior Certificate to a minimum Level 6 QQI qualification.

The campaign also sought recognition through the accreditation of the National SNA Training Programme. Approximately 100 SNA members were engaged in a campaign which resulted in engagement with TDs, senators and other elected representatives across all political parties. A national seminar took place in January 2022, attended by over 500 members who listened to academic experts set out the case for improving the level of SNA qualifications to adequately reflect the role of the SNAs in our schools.

In July 2022, the Minister for Special Education informed the Dáil Education Committee that the UCD National Training Programme would be accredited, and also that a review of the minimum essential qualification for SNAs would now take place, and that it was her own view that it should be changed. Subsequently the Minister for Education announced the accreditation of the UCD programme at QQI level 6. The raising of the minimum essential qualification is under discussion within the SNA contract talks.

8 Negotiating a new funding and governance structure for School Completion Programmes

Following the transfer of administrative responsibility for the school completion programme (SCP) to the Department of Education in 2021, Fórsa has sought meaningful engagement on the future funding and governance structures with an ultimate goal of securing public service status for staff working within SCP. A national seminar in March 2022 was well supported. The then Taoiseach, Micheál Martin, attended, and provided commitments to secure the future for the SCP within the education sector. Since then, efforts to deliver those commitments into tangible progress have continued.

9 Implementing a new job evaluation scheme in higher education

A WRC agreement in 2019, to design and implement a new job evaluation scheme for members working in Technological Universities, Institutes of Technology and Mary Immaculate College, was concluded following a successful campaign of industrial action. Work on the design of a new job evaluation scheme has been led by facilitator Sean McHugh, who has assisted the parties in developing a robust scheme and which has now been tested across different higher education institutions. It's anticipated that the scheme will be rolled out at the start of the next academic year.

Other developments

Bereavement leave

In November 2022, Fórsa secured the application of the civil service bereavement leave entitlements for staff in higher education, ETBs and SNAs. Claims will be submitted for the application of the same terms for non-public servant members in SCPs, school secretaries, caretakers as well as staff in education centres.

SNA allocation model

Fórsa continues to advocate for changes to the SNA allocation model and is seeking clarity on the future direction of policy for the special education sector. Joan McCrohan serves on the consultative forum for the review of the EPSEN Act, a process which might finally result in the statutory guarantee of access to education for all children first promised in 2004.

The proposed 'frontloading' SNA-allocation model, first proposed in 2018, has not been implemented and the Schools Inclusion Model pilot - covering 72 schools in HSE CHO Area 7 - has not yet been rolled out to other parts of the country. Despite this lack of progress some positive steps have been taken with a freeze on mainstream SNA allocations since 2020, with 2,000 new SNA posts being added to special classes and developing schools. In 2022, out of some 20,000 SNA posts, only 18 SNAs applied for redundancy. Fórsa is discussing the need for a robust redeployment scheme as part of the SNA contract negotiations.

Kathleen O'Doherty, an appreciation

School secretary Kathleen O'Doherty was among the former members of Fórsa's School Secretaries branch committee given a hero's farewell at the branch AGM in January 2023.

Kathleen has been a long-standing and passionate trade union activist based in Donegal. Leading the tributes was incoming branch chair Luisa Carty and Fórsa president Michael Smyth, who acknowledged Kathleen's key role in driving the campaign for pay fairness for school secretaries over several years.

Those efforts saw school secretaries move on to a standardised pay scale (see pages 5 and 10), and move to a centralised payroll system. Michael praised Kathleen's "total commitment to the campaign for pay fairness, and her strong belief in the power of trade union solidarity."

Outgoing branch committee members Marion Jackson and Anita O'Reilly were also in attendance at the AGM and received presentations and thanks from the branch.

SNA training accreditation

Fórsa welcomed the Department of Education's decision to accredit the UCD National SNA Training Programme as a Level 6 Special Purpose Award. The department announced the decision in December 2022, and marks the first time the Department of Education has recognised the need for a formal qualification for the 20,000 SNAs working with students across the school sector.

The decision meets the terms sought by Fórsa since 2020. It also delivers on the commitment to accredit the course secured by Fórsa and confirmed at the hearing with the Dáil Joint Education Committee in June 2022.

Some 1,300 SNAs have completed the programme to date, which has been positively received throughout the sector. The aim is to enrol a total of 3,500 SNAs over the four years of the programme up to the end of 2025.

The department has confirmed that UCD is now considering how those SNAs who've completed the programme, will have their award accredited retrospectively. Fórsa will continue its work to secure a new entry qualification.

Blog: membership milestone

In July 2022, Fórsa's Education membership reached 17,000 for the first time, marking an increase of more than 5,000 members over three years. In this special blog post, head of Education Andy Pike says that as Fórsa's membership density has improved, so have the outcomes the union has been able to deliver for members. Read the full blog [here](#).

Incomes

Public service pay - Building Momentum review

In early 2022, Fórsa general secretary Kevin Callinan called on the Government to open negotiations on a new public service pay agreement, and said the size and timing of any agreed pay adjustments would “need to reflect the realities of the cost-of-living crisis, which is hurting workers regardless of what sector they work in.”

Kevin proposed seeking a review of the Building Momentum public service pay agreement at the AGM of the ICTU Public Services Committee (PSC) on 11th March 2022, as Fórsa continued its focus on cost-of-living pressures throughout the union’s AGM season and its biennial delegate conference in May 2022. Inflation had exceeded what had been projected when Building Momentum was negotiated in late 2020.

Average inflation across the whole of 2021 was 2.4%. The value of Building Momentum pay improvements was 0.25% over the same period. The EU predicted that Irish inflation would rise to 4.6% for the whole of 2022. This forecast would mean the annualised value of the Building Momentum increases in the same year would not exceed 1.2%, even when sectoral bargaining was considered.

With the deal due to expire at the end of 2022, Fórsa said talks on a successor agreement would need to prioritise the restoration and improvement of living standards in the context of high inflation.

Kevin Callinan maintained his call for decisive Government action to protect living standards, and to ensure the public service could compete in a tight labour market: “We need to act now to stabilise the current public service agreement, which is essential to certainty in public service delivery, industrial relations, and public finances.”

As pay talks got underway in June, the initial efforts indicated a significant distance between unions, represented by the ICTU Public Services Committee (PSC) and Government representatives.

By late June, the process had stalled. The PSC, chaired by Kevin Callinan, said the Government’s initial pay offer – an additional increase of just 2.5% for the (2021-2022) period, when inflation was expected to be at least 9% over that period – could not credibly be put to ballot while low and middle-income workers struggled with soaring prices. Unions told the WRC that an improved offer was necessary to make further talks on public service pay worthwhile.

The then Tánaiste, Leo Varadkar, said the Government wanted to reengage in the WRC-brokered talks, and that it was prepared to make a further offer. However, no further developments took place until mid-August, when unions announced they were preparing industrial action ballots in a coordinated campaign for improved pay terms due to the cost-of-living crisis.

Ahead of the commencement of the planned ballots, the pay talks process resumed at the WRC after a ten-week hiatus, during which the Government said it was reflecting on its position. Unions indicated they would engage positively in the process and were prepared to be flexible. Kevin Callinan restated his position that a significantly improved pay offer from the Government side was essential to any progress.

Progress was swift. By the beginning of September, Fórsa’s elected national executive (NEC) met to consider the details of new WRC pay proposals, engaging in a constructive debate that strongly acknowledged the financial realities facing working people across the economy, as well as their fears for the future. Kevin Callinan said the deal was the best that could be achieved through negotiations.

The NEC subsequently recommend the WRC-proposed public service pay package – to be known as the Review of Building Momentum Public Service Agreement – in a ballot of union members.

The main provisions of the deal are as follows:

- Increases of 3% with effect (backdated) from 2nd February 2022.
- An increase of 2% from 1st March 2023.
- An increase of 1.5% or €750 (whichever is the greater) from 1st October 2023.

These measures are in addition to 1% or €500, whichever is greater, which fell due at the beginning of October 2022 under the existing agreement.

The minimum payment of €750 a year from October 2022 meant the package is of greater value to workers on lower incomes. The payment was worth 8% to a worker earning €25,000 a year and 7% to a person on €37,500 a year.

Fórsa produced a ‘[frequently asked questions](#)’ document, including a facility for members to ask questions, while a series of Fórsa information meetings took place online and in person across the country.

Kevin Callinan commented that neither side achieved all it sought in the negotiations, but that the revised package was a significant improvement on the pay terms of the current agreement, and worth more to those who need it most.

The Government was set to announce the 2023 Budget while the ballot was in progress. Kevin said Government pledges to supplement pay measures with other cost-of-living supports in the Budget would influence the outcome of the vote.

In his capacity as ICTU president, Kevin led the trade union delegation at the September meeting of the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF) where unions made a strong case for the need for very substantial assistance to help all workers, including public servants, cope with the cost-of-living crisis. At the LEEF meeting in December 2022, Transport Minister Eamon Ryan acknowledged that union representations had had a significant influence on the Government’s budgetary approach.

Budget 2023 was announced on 27th September 2022, and included a series of short-term measures to help people with the cost of living, including electricity credits, increased social welfare payments and a series of once-off payments.

Fórsa members backed the review of Building Momentum in an electronic ballot by a significant margin (91.3%) on a strong turnout (67%). Kevin Callinan said the result was a strong statement of support for the pay deal, worth 6.5% in addition to existing Building Momentum pay adjustments, with better increases for lower paid workers.

Fórsa’s endorsement of the package meant the union supported ratification of the pay measures at a meeting of the ICTU Public Services Committee (PSC) on 7th October 2022. The revised pay deal would expire at the end of 2023, which meant that pay talks on a successor would need to take place before the end of the year.

School secretaries

In 2022, school secretaries voted overwhelmingly to accept an historic new package of proposals which placed them all on public service salary rates after a decades-long union campaign for pay equity. The deal, negotiated by Fórsa, significantly improved incomes and paid leave arrangements for school secretaries. The first phase of the official transition to the new payscales was completed by October 2022.

The second phase of the transition to the new packages of pay and working conditions took effect in the final quarter of 2022. All school secretaries transferred to a new pay-scale aligned with the public service clerical officer scale, which meant that school secretaries would also benefit from the terms of the new public service pay agreement. Prior to this, most were employed directly by schools, with some earning little more than minimum wage.

Paid salaries averaged over 52 weeks for the first time, including the cash value of job seekers benefit, which means secretaries no longer need to sign on for unemployment benefits during school holidays. The deal also enshrined 22 days paid leave a year, as well as payment for ten public holidays, replacing ad-hoc arrangements that left many school secretaries with no paid holidays.

Collective bargaining

The final report of the high-level working group on collective bargaining was published in October 2022. The group was established in 2021 by the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF) in advance of a new EU directive that requires each member state to take action to expand the percentage of workers covered by collective bargaining on wage setting.

Collective bargaining coverage in Ireland is currently around 34%, the new directive requires that countries achieve up to 80% coverage. Non-union employers could potentially face penalties for failing to negotiate with trade unions.

Trade unions were represented on the high-level group by then ICTU general secretary Patricia King. Following its publication Patricia said the recommendations in the report will, through increased collective bargaining coverage, provide new opportunities to achieve decent working and living standards for hundreds of thousands of workers, and deliver improved outcomes for workers and employers, as well as for society and the economy.

The Executive Council of the ICTU endorsed the recommendations and believes them to be crucial to aligning Irish industrial relations procedures with other EU countries. The group's recommendations will form the basis for the transposition of the directive to comply with EU law, including:

- That existing legislation relating to Joint Labour Committees (JLCs) be strengthened to enable an Employment Regulation Order to be implemented on foot of employers being afforded all reasonable opportunity to engage.
- That technical assessors be appointed by the Labour Court to advise the Court in pay comparison claims with the purpose of improving on current mechanisms.
- That legislation requires an employer to engage with a trade union who seeks good faith engagement where they represent at least 10% of workers in a grade, group or category within the employment. Where an employer refuses such an engagement and ignores the Labour Court decisions on the matter, the trade union can seek a Circuit Court order for implementation against the employer.

The report's recommendations illustrate the potential for radically improved collective bargaining conditions in Ireland. The crucial challenge for trade unions is to continue to build membership density.

The high-level group comprised representatives from ICTU, IBEC and Professor Bill Roche, UCD. It was chaired by Professor Michael Doherty of Maynooth University. A full copy of the report is available [here](#).

'Haddington Road' working hours

Civil service circular 14/2022 was published at the end of May 2022, outlining the details of the union-negotiated restoration of pre-Haddington Road working hours, with a floor of 35 hours per week.

The circular, which then rolled out across the public service, implements an independent body's recommendation that public service employees' working time should be restored.

Additional 'Haddington Road' hours were introduced in 2013, but most people who saw their working time increased returned to pre-2013 levels, albeit with a floor of 35 hours per week.

The 'Haddington Road' hours ceased to be in effect from 1st July 2022, when working time was restored to pre-austerity levels.

The breakthrough was achieved following the formation of Fórsa, which brought 80,000 public servants - including thousands of activists and workplace reps - into one strong and united trade union.

The union made the restoration of the hours a top priority in the negotiations that led to the Building Momentum public service agreement in 2020, and insisted there'd be no deal unless the issue was addressed.

Fórsa's strategy won support from other unions, and Building Momentum established an independent body to resolve the issue. Its January 2022 report recommended a return to 2012 working time, with a minimum working week of 35 hours.

General secretary Kevin Callinan said the achievement was won because Fórsa had the determination, capacity, belief and collective strength to make it happen, despite dogged management resistance.

[See: Haddington Road hours FAQs](#)

Social dialogue

The Irish Congress of Trade Unions continues to engage at the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF). ICTU is led in the LEEF engagements by ICTU president and Fórsa general secretary Kevin Callinan. The LEEF meets approximately four times a year and brings together senior Government, trade union and employer representatives to discuss economic, employment and labour market issues.

As cost-of-living pressures mounted last year, unions made a strong case at the September LEEF meeting for the need for very substantial assistance to help all workers, including public servants, cope with the cost-of-living crisis (see *Building Momentum* review on page 9). Unions highlighted the real risk of energy poverty for workers, including those who rely on social welfare benefits.

Employer representatives at the LEEF also supported very significant government intervention to assist households and businesses, and called for a huge fiscal response utilising buoyant exchequer finances. Unions noted that the Government was moving toward a similar viewpoint, indicating its intention to introduce a further range of 'cost-of-living' measures, which were introduced in Budget 2023 last September.

Fórsa continues to advocate for the State to strengthen its support for social dialogue between Government, unions, employers, communities and civil society organisations, in order to meet the range of challenges facing the country, including the housing crisis, climate response, childcare and education.

Childcare

Responding to the Budget in September 2022, Fórsa said the future of the Irish workplace is being shaped by how working families with young children are forced to weigh the cost of childcare against entering or returning to the workplace.

The union acknowledged that the 25% cut in childcare costs announced in the Budget 2023 would help many families but said many would still be left with "near impossible" choices about the offset of childcare costs against work.

The existing deficit in childcare, a problem which the State has lagged on for several decades, needs more than a temporary crisis intervention. It demands a permanent and radical solution, such as a fully publicly funded universal system.

Failure to tackle childcare comprehensively means a significant block remains to many parents, usually mothers, hoping to enter the workforce or to return to work after having children.

Statutory sick pay

The Commencement Order for the Sick Leave Act 2022 was signed in November 2022, creating a new entitlement to paid sick leave from an employer and which came into effect on 1st January 2023. The legislation followed a campaign by the ICTU for legislation to make sick pay mandatory, which won cross-party support and widespread public support.

Previously, no legal right existed to be paid while someone is on sick leave from work, meaning that half of the workforce, over one million workers, were not covered for paid sick leave in their terms and conditions.

Most Fórsa members are already covered by the public service sick pay scheme, while the new scheme will see many Fórsa members working in the private sector afforded greater protection.

From 1st January 2023, workers have a right to:

- Paid sick leave for up to three sick days per year, increasing to five days in 2024, seven days in 2025 and 10 days in 2026.
- A rate of payment for statutory sick leave of 70% of normal wages to be paid by employers (up to a maximum €110 per day).
- Take a complaint to the WRC where they are not provided with a company sick pay scheme.

To be entitled to paid sick leave under the new scheme, an employee must be working for an employer for at least 13 weeks and will also need to be certified by a GP as unfit to work.

The legislation sets out the minimum standard that an employer must provide but does not prevent employers having superior sick pay schemes of their own to attract and retain staff, or on foot of an agreement with a trade union.

Travel and subsistence

Revised rates for work-related travel and subsistence took effect from 1st September 2022. They include changes to the standard domestic subsistence rates, overnight and day subsistence rates. Full details are available on the Fórsa website [here](#) and Revenue website [here](#).

A social wage

Income protection for workers is exceptionally weak in Ireland compared to the rest of the EU, and Ireland is the only country in the OECD not to require employers to contribute to a worker's pension. It is also one of the last of the EU's 27 member states to make sick pay mandatory (see page 12).

In response to the Government's publication of a proposed overhaul of the jobseeker's benefit system - which could change the payment structure to make it directly proportional to the recipient's previous earnings - the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) published its position paper, *The Social Wage*, in March 2023.

The social wage plan proposes a move from a flat-rate to a pay-related benefit payment for workers, linking a person's jobseeker's payment to their previous earnings and work history. It's designed to soften the income shock that a person may face if they suddenly lose their job.

Speaking at the policy paper launch, Fórsa general secretary and ICTU president Kevin Callinan said that there is now a "heightened public demand to strengthen our frayed social safety net" in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic.

A full copy of the position paper is available [here](#).

Domestic violence leave

Fórsa's conference in May 2022 unanimously backed a conference motion for statutory leave for victims of domestic violence. The conference motion committed the union to actively campaign for an effective statutory entitlement.

As the Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill (2022), which included provision for domestic violence leave, made its way through the legislative process, Fórsa supported the call by Womens' Aid to include ten days of fully paid leave. This is widely considered to be best practice.

However, the legislation only provides for five days of domestic violence leave. Fórsa wrote directly to the Minister in February 2023, urging him to consider positions on this expressed by several senators at the Seanad Committee Stage debate in January. Fórsa has committed to working with other trade unions to collectively bargain to secure 10 days paid leave for workers who need to avail of domestic violence leave.

Work Life Balance Bill

The Work Life Balance and Miscellaneous Provisions Bill (2022) was passed by both Houses of the Oireachtas on 29th March 2023. The Government's draft legislation, published in June 2022, attracted huge criticism from Fórsa and other unions, as well as labour law experts and others.

The revised legislation followed extensive work by the cross-union 'Make Remote Work!' campaigning group. Congress welcomed the Government delivering on its commitment to a new workers' right to request remote work.

The Bill introduces a new workers' right to paid leave for victims of domestic violence (see Domestic Violence leave above) and new rights for workers requesting remote work, both of which ICTU and affiliated unions campaigned for. The legislation includes improvements to support working parents and carers balance paid work with family care, necessitated to give effect to EU law.

Communications

Fórsa's head of communications Bernard Harbor retired from the union at the end of 2022. Under the union's programme of Strategic Change, a number of changes are underway to the configuration of the union's communications activity. There are four main areas of activity: campaigns, digital, membership communications and media relations.

Communications officer Niall Shanahan has assumed responsibilities for media relations. Kate O'Sullivan, formerly of Amnesty International and Save the Children, took up the post of director of digital in July 2022. Kevin Donoghue was appointed to the role of director of campaigns in September 2022, and a new post, director of membership communications, was created in 2023.

Media relations

The union continues to develop its position in national media as an authoritative voice on industrial relations, public services, collective bargaining and a wide range of social issues. Aligning with Fórsa's strategic plan, the union plans to continue the development of boosting local media relations activity, working with branches regionally to create media content and establish local representative voices in the media.

Membership communications

The new post of director of member communications will provide capacity for the union to lead in the direction and delivery of a diverse spectrum of events, outreach, media, and other practical supports and activities to inform and empower Fórsa's membership. The director of member communications will collaborate closely with the directors of media relations, digital, and campaigns teams to coordinate, reinforce, and amplify their work.

Digital strategy

Fórsa's Digital Strategy for 2023-2025 focuses on five main areas:

Recruitment

Driving membership recruitment through increased digital traffic, supporting and improving the Join Online process, and showcasing the value of Fórsa through social media.

Membership retention

Utilising data and digital tools to help retain existing members. This includes data modelling, showcasing Fórsa achievements, and increasing digital communications on membership benefits.

Membership information and services

Enhancing accessibility of Fórsa's digital presence and offering valuable resources to members. This includes redeveloping forsa.ie based on user analytics and tailoring social media content.

Digital campaigning

Fostering online activism, increasing digital activism through strategic planning, and using paid digital ads.

Digital trade unionism

Fórsa aims to embrace best practices from global partners, explore digital opportunities and use analytics to track member experiences and identify growth potential in online trade unionism.

Campaigns unit

Research officer Juliette Cooper started working with the unit in 2022. The role enables the campaigns unit to contribute more broadly to research within the union. Juliette has made significant contributions to the research capacity of the unit since joining the team.

TASC report

The campaigns unit arranged meetings with political parties and officials in relation to the content of the TASC report throughout 2022. Work will continue over the summer of 2023 to meet political parties about the role of the state.

Supplemental research to the TASC report is currently underway to examine the physical operating capacity of the public service and civil service in Ireland, compared to other European countries similar in population size.

Just Transition Alliance and climate change

Fórsa is a founding member of ICTU's Just Transition Alliance. Launched in March 2022, the alliance is composed of trade unions and climate change groups seeking a just transition for workers and continues to build political support.

Care for Caretakers

The Care for Caretakers campaign was relaunched in 2023, and a recruitment pack has been developed specifically for caretakers. The campaign relies heavily on the support of Fórsa's school secretary members and the campaign plan was presented to the branch in March 2023.

Progression research

The research on progression for students with additional care needs looks at current take up rates into further and higher education, and the options available for students with more complex care needs. It identifies a large gap between services, information and support access for students and families. The paper will launch at the 2023 Education Divisional Conference.

Housing

Fórsa is a member of the steering groups of Raise the Roof, a trade union coalition campaign, and Home for Good, a campaign to have the right to housing recognised in the Constitution. Lobbying for a referendum on the right to housing to be held within the next Government term. The campaign is hosting regional meetings to prepare for a referendum.

Four-day week

The four-day week campaign continues to build support in Ireland and across the globe. A report published in November 2022 provided insights into the experience of Irish companies and workers that took on the four-day week trial.

Results were incredibly positive. Workers reported reduced stress and higher levels of satisfaction in their lives and careers. Employers rated their experience of the trial at 9.2/10. The Irish campaign will launch another round of trials in 2023.

Remunicipalisation

A report on the remunicipalisation of waste services in Dublin City Council was commissioned in 2022 and will be publicly available in April 2023. The report explores the current set of waste services in Dublin City and makes recommendations on how to improve waste service provision.

Job Evaluation

The campaigns unit has been supporting the local government divisions on the job evaluation campaign, is currently supporting work relating to the ballot on job evaluation. A Valentine's Day publicity event was organised with the support of Fórsa's media relations director, gaining local coverage across the country.

Collective bargaining

The campaigns unit commissioned two rounds of research related to collective bargaining in Ireland. The research was commissioned to prepare for a public awareness campaign on collective bargaining.

The results of this research showed that there is, in fact, widespread understanding of collective bargaining in Ireland. Support for the core elements of collective bargaining was also very high. The result of the research was to suspend a public awareness campaign and instead divert support to a national organising campaign.

Administrative Professionals' day

This year marks the first occasion that Fórsa trade union will celebrate Administrative Professionals' Day. The day serves as an opportunity to acknowledge the significant contribution of administrative members to their respective organisations. This event is being managed by the campaigns unit.

Fórsa has encouraged branches across the country to take part in a coffee morning that has been supplemented with a merchandise pack. To date 26 branches have signed up to take part in the event.

Stop the Stigma: menstruation and menopause

After members in Fórsa raised concerns about workplace supports for menstruation and menopause in a motion passed at the union's policy-setting national conference in May of 2022, Fórsa launched a survey to gauge member experiences with periods and menstruation in the workplace.

The research findings are stark, both in relation to the prevalence of diagnosis with a severe condition, and the need to take sick leave from work during menstruation and menopause. The findings affirm Fórsa's position that this is a priority issue in the workplace, both as a public awareness campaign and as a negotiating agenda item.

The 'Stop the Stigma' campaign as been established to support trade unions and employees in advocating for menstrual and menopause policies in workplaces. The new campaign aims to empower workers with the resources they need to ask for supports in the workplace, as well as inform workers about these policies so they know to ask for them.

Fórsa is also rallying support for the campaign by partnering with other trade unions and raising it through the industrial relations forums with employers.

Ireland for all

Fórsa joined up with Le Chéile - a cross-sectoral alliance working together to challenge the far right in Ireland - and the NWCI for the #IrelandForAll rally in February. The union's elected officers formally backed Fórsa joining the alliance, and to support its anti-racism rally in Dublin on 18th February 2023.

Participation in the rally is an important statement to oppose attempts by far-right organisations to spread hate, fear and misinformation about refugees and asylum seekers. Far right groups have been targeting working-class communities stoking unwarranted fear and resentment.

The trade union movement has a central role to play in facing down those attempts to frighten and intimidate people who have come to Ireland seeking sanctuary from hunger, poverty, climate catastrophe and war. Fórsa's participation in the rally continues the trade union movement's proud history of opposing racism, bigotry and sectarianism.

Training, development and organising

Skills Academy training

Fórsa's director of Membership Training and Development is Fiona Dunne.

Since October 2022, Skills Academy has returned to delivering most courses and programmes in person, providing a welcome change for tutors and students alike.

The first of the 5-module Expanded Workplace Representatives Training (November - April 2023) was rescheduled to accommodate a high ballot return and delivered 30 modules across multiple locations to approximately 80 workplace representatives during the period. Two Annual Branch Returns workshops, in December 2022 and January 2023, were ably delivered by Finance staff who also assisted participants in the practical exercise of completing the returns. Other popular courses included *Preparing for the AGM* for novices, along with one-day courses for newly elected chairpersons, secretaries and treasurers, which was delivered this year in Cork.

Since January 2023, the *Fórsa101* online course, which provides an introductory overview of the union, was opened to all members and will be a permanent feature of our programme running twice on the second Wednesday of every month.

Another new addition is the online *Lunch and Learn* series, again open to all members running on the last Friday of every month and dealing with a different topic each month. This series complements our extensive programme of current courses with previous topics including *Writing a motion*, *Quick guide to public speaking*, *Protecting your data*, and *Menstrual and menopausal welfare at work*, all of which were recorded and are saved to the Skills Academy YouTube channel.

A six-member union learning group, comprising Connect, CWU, Fórsa, FSU, MANDATE and SIPTU, was informally established in November 2022 to develop new training opportunities, share resources, and deliver courses collaboratively across partners.

External bodies provided courses during the year including a mock conciliation by the WRC, a guide to procedures and submissions by the Labour Court, understanding the Public Sector Duty by IHREC, and public speaking for conference delegates and representatives presented by Montague Communications.

A new programme, *Foundational Workplace Representatives Training* is currently being developed with the support of all tutors, for a launch in September. This will form an essential part of our core package of programmes and will be delivered in every location during the next academic year.

Following a series of extensive consultations and discussions with tutors, officials and senior representatives, a permanent calendar of training has been agreed for delivery of core programmes. This will mean that both tutors and branches will be aware of when training programmes are scheduled to take place every year. A printed version of the calendar was published in April 2023 and has been circulated through branches via training officers and at divisional conferences.

Stand-alone tailored branch training days have also been developed throughout the year in collaboration with the branch executive and with the full consultation of the assigned officials.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all our students and tutors for their dedication to building capacity and developing new skills to represent our membership to the best of their ability. We would also like to thank all Fórsa staff across the country for their support and help to deliver our programmes successfully and look forward to working with everyone into the future.

For a more detailed explanation of our courses and programmes, please contact the Fórsa Skills Academy [here](#).

Strategic organising

A strategic organising model was introduced in 2020 throughout sections of the Fórsa divisional and membership network. This approach resulted in the implementation of project-based sectoral initiatives, initially and primarily focused on creating influence and building power at workplace level. The initial implementation of this approach was conducted in several targeted areas, subsequently creating opportunities for significant and proactive ground and membership engagement, issue consolidation and the creation of appropriate strategies to advance agreed strategic organising objectives.

It's worth noting that such a model was applied during the Covid pandemic and, despite perceived obstacles to achieving positive outcomes through the utilisation of such methodologies, the application of this model has resulted in consistent density and union leadership growth at employment level, and creating opportunities to address issues that are of concern to workers.

The advancement of strategic organising will continue to broaden scope as appropriate, and in line with central organisational objectives. However, it's worth noting that where this model is applied, significant union activation, growth and participation at ground and workplace level becomes evident, resulting in consistent increases in density, leadership and communications activity, and increased union leverage on matters important to Fórsa members.

While extremely labour intensive, the investment in this process by the union, through the utilisation of a specialised group of staff, whom have considerable experience in creating effective and sustainable union change within workplaces. However, such success requires the support and expertise of the union's activist and representative structure through all levels of the organisation, including, in some circumstances, divisional support. This methodology will continue to be rolled out in a phased and project-based manner, as appropriate.

Equivalent Grades committees

The continued development and advancement of the existing Equivalent Grades committees (Executive/Grades IV - VII and Clerical Officer/Grade III) is one example of a significant contributor to the growth and influence of Fórsa in workplaces across the divisions during this timeframe. Formed under rule upon the formation of Fórsa, the Equivalent Grades committees are made up of divisional executive nominees and meet quarterly to identify and discuss issues relevant to all concerned at the appropriate grades.

This unique and proactive forum has facilitated the roll-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 such issue-based strategies have included pay, hours, leave and job evaluation which led to the creating organisational influence on specific national issues which has directly contributed to effecting positive change for clerical and executive officers, not just within their workplaces but beyond. Targeted work progresses for these committees as this cross-union forum continues to influence and amplify the voice of clerical and executive officers through the utilisation of a strategic organising model.

The Equivalent Grades committees form one constituent piece of numerous strategic organising projects that are currently operational in a number of sectors.

Strategic Change Project

Branch supports, development and Membership Engagement Project

Following significant engagement with branches it became obvious that the administrative burden on branch activists was limiting the time available to focus on branch growth and industrial relations issues. The project team therefore prioritised supports aimed at creating capacity in branches and assist branches to consolidate where appropriate. A clear definition of the role of workplace representatives in the form of a Workplace Representatives Charter has also been drafted and will be subject to further consultation before it is launched. A branch toolkit is also at the design stage and will be piloted in several branches in 2023.

SOLAS

The new membership system went live for staff at the end of March 2022 and has been further developed over the past year. A branch rollout plan has been agreed and fourteen branches from across the union have been invited to training in April 2023. Those branches will then have access to data relating to their membership and this will be a significant improvement to the information they can currently access. The project team meet with key stakeholders, including the branch working group, regularly to provide a comprehensive update on all areas of the project.

Fórsa's Join Online Project

The team, in collaboration with the directors of Digital and Membership, continues to revise and improve the 'Join Online' process in partnership with our provider. The aim is to ensure a smooth application process and minimise the number of manual interventions needed when processing applications and updating member data.

Strategic Plan Implementation Board

The Project Implementation Board has met throughout the year to oversee the implementation of Fórsa's strategic plan.

All divisions are engaged in activities which contribute to the achievement of the core objectives of the strategic plan. Historically much of this activity was not captured in a way which allowed for tracking progress towards specific goals, and a process of capturing all activity within one document and aligning it with the plan is now underway.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Education pay scale circulars

Circular 002/2023: Revision of Pay for certain staff in the Higher Education Sector with effect from 1st March 2023. [Click here.](#)

Circular 0008/2023: Revision of Salaries for Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) under Building Momentum Pay Agreement with effect from 1st March 2023. [Click here.](#)

Circular 0009/2023: Revision of Salaries and Allowances of Certain Grades other than Teachers and SNAs employed by ETBs under The Building Momentum Pay Agreement with effect from 1st March 2023. [Click here.](#)

Circular 0010/2023: Revision of Salaries of School Secretaries and School Maintenance Staff in Community and Comprehensive Schools under The Building Momentum Pay Agreement effective from 01 March 2023. [Click here.](#)

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