

Key union wants 'inflation busting' pay rises from new government

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Based on a survey of members, Fórsa is calling on the next government to agree pay rises "which go beyond rates of inflation" and it wants to see the 4-day week trialled in the public and civil service.

Coming from a key public service union, with 87,000 members, the union's central industrial relations goals are likely to be pursued in the form of future claims, particularly in talks on the next national-level public service agreement.

It says that over 20,000 of its members answered a survey on which the election manifesto is based.

On pay, it wants the next government to negotiate and agree a successor pay agreement, with increases "in real terms" that beat inflation, to follow the current Public Service Agreement 2024-2026. Under the 'Pay' heading, it is also calling for:

- Meaningful engagement on the local bargaining clause to produce outcomes that address the issues affecting grades, groups and categories of public servants.
- Remove the two lowest points, applied in the austerity era, to pay scales for new entrants to the public service.
- Support the reduction in the number of increments on public service pay scales to a maximum of 10 annual increments.
- Remove the FEMPI-era requirement that prohibits new entrants from obtaining incremental credit for relevant prior experience.
- Pay public and civil servants at negotiated overtime rates for every hour worked beyond contracted hours, including where time off in lieu is given, at an amount in line with Article 4.2 of the Revised European Social Charter.

4-DAY WEEK PILOT

The union wants a pilot scheme on a 4-day working week "in parts of the public and civil service", without loss of pay or productivity.

Notably, it doesn't mention the health sector, where it would be particularly difficult to reorganise working time, especially on the front line, without a recruitment surge – a prospect that in itself would be difficult due to ongoing retention and attraction challenges.

The union points to evidence that suggests that a 4-day workweek leads to improved health and wellbeing.

UK research is cited that "has shown that poor mental health in the public sector has cost the UK government around £1,794 to £2,174 per employee per annum through presenteeism and absenteeism". And, it says, 4-day week trials "around the World" have also shown that by reducing worktime hours, "we can alleviate these problems ... and increase wellbeing and employee satisfaction".

CIVIL SERVICE

Fórsa will seek to amend the Industrial Relations Acts “to give civil service workers access to the WRC and Labour Court OR completely overhaul, as a matter of priority, the conciliation and arbitration scheme to modernise the process for dispute resolution, so that civil service workers can have similar recourse to almost all other workers in the state by involving the WRC in the scheme”.

It would be likely that such a development would require extra resources for the WRC and the Labour Court.

Fórsa also wants the next government “to legislate to modernise the outdated practise of excluding the majority of civil servants from engaging in political activity”.

This restriction has been one of the “given” curbs on civil servants since the foundation of the State, and would require very careful consideration before any government might tamper with it.

WATER REFERENDUM?

Fórsa wants an amendment to the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act and Employment Equality Act “to protect employees affected by period or menopause-related symptoms in the workplace” and the provision of “free access to hormone replacement therapy (HRT)”.

It also will seek to ensure that all relevant workers who delivered frontline services receive the pandemic special recognition payment (PSRP). It seeks “a third-party review” of the implementation of the scheme by a commission “to ensure relevant organisations were not excluded from the spirit of the scheme”.

On the issue of water, the Fórsa survey finds 57% of respondents “would support candidates or parties” that commit to an early referendum to ensure that Ireland’s water services remain in public ownership and control, “even if they did not vote for them before”.

While this might seem like a reasonable majority, it looks similar to the sort of opinion poll majorities that preceded the collapse of propositions in a number of referendums, historically and in more recent times.