Irish nurses set for first all-out strike

Harvey Thompson
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Over 27,000 nurses from across the Irish Republic are expected to stage their first ever all-out strike on October 19, after rejecting a government pay deal by a vote of 9 to 1.

The Irish Prime Minister, Bertie Ahern, warned the nurses that he would not yield beyond the £60 million pay offer made by the Labour Court. Speaking at the National Centre for Partnership in Dublin last week, Ahern restated the intransigence of the government position, “It is simply implausible in the present context to suppose that developments in any part of the public service can be viewed in isolation and will not have a domino effect on other groups, sectors or indeed society as a whole.”

Ireland presently has the fastest growing economy in the European Union (EU). GDP is expected to grow by around 7.7 percent this year. This has created a record budget surplus of over 2 billion euros ($2.1 billion). Leading economists and the Irish central bank now point to a very real danger that the economy may overheat. This situation has arisen in no small measure due to the host of belt-tightening legislation agreed between the unions and government, such as the labour pact "Partnership 2000".

There are now signs of a tide of resentment amongst many workers over growing social disparities. This is being fuelled by recent revelations of tax evasion amongst the business and governing elite—one tribunal is specifically examining payments made to politicians. Meanwhile, Irish workers pay some of the highest taxes in the EU.

After the results of a formal ballot, on October 11, there is expected to be a week's notice of strike action and a march by nurses on Parliament on October 21.

Unions and the Health Services Employers Agency are to meet next week to decide on emergency services to cover for the duration of the strike.

Irish nurses have been consistently campaigning for better pay and conditions since 1996. They argue that there are fundamental problems with pay scales that are crucial for the future of the profession in Ireland. They have also been calling for more recognition for length of service by staff nurses, increased allowances and better promotion differentials—all of which are believed to be necessary to encourage more young people to go into nursing.

The industrial truce, a central plank of the governments' economic policy, is now believed to be under threat. With hostility mounting towards the government, there is broad public sympathy for the plight of the nurses. Political commentators have also noted the growing unrest among teachers and transport workers who view the nurses' dispute as a litmus test for future action.

A national nursing official, Oliver McDonagh, appealed to the government to address the workers' grievances now in the midst of an economic boom, or later there would be “serious chaos”. He concluded, “We're about 2,000 nurses short even when they are all at work, so you can imagine what an all-out strike's going to look like.”

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