

Irish nurses strike suspended pending membership ballot

Mike Ingram
29 October 1999

The first ever all-out strike by nurses in the Irish Republic was suspended after nine days on Wednesday following new recommendations by the Labour Court. The cross government, union and employer organisation made new proposals to address the central demand of the nurses for greater skill recognition within the health sector to bring them in line with other industries.

The deal proposes the creation of 2,500 new senior staff nurse positions, the appointment of 1,100 clinical nurse managers and 1,250 clinical nurse specialists. Allowances worth £1,000 to £1,500 a year are to be given to public health, psychiatric and mental health nurses.

As a result of the strike, 70,000 outpatient admissions and 9,000 elective admissions were postponed. Hospitals throughout the country are not expected to resume normal levels of patient care until early next week as a result of the backlog.

While it is anticipated that a ballot will go in favour of the deal, it seems far from welcome among the workforce. As pickets were lifted and staff returned to hospital wards last night, the Irish press reported growing feelings of dissatisfaction with the deal and the decision to suspend the strike.

Union members had been instructed not to comment, but anonymous remarks published by the *Irish Independent* give some indication of the feelings of resentment towards the unions.

"After nine days of freezing outside the hospital gates, it seems we put ourselves through hell for very little. Nobody wanted to be on strike, but we always felt we were going to make a vital breakthrough for our profession—this is far from a breakthrough.

"Even at a quick glance, it seems like there is some kind of an improvement, but only a small one, on the

table. A lot of the other nurses also feel that we should be having a ballot first and then deciding if we should come off strike duty", a staff nurse in the West of Ireland said.

Intimating at the union's strategy in suspending the strike one nurse said, "It's going to be very difficult for us to go back on strike in another week or so if we decide to reject this offer. I don't know how we managed to get ourselves into this position."

The Nursing Alliance, which covers all four unions involved, suspended the strike immediately after the Labour Court award was handed down by Chairman Finbarr Flood.

Nursing Alliance Chairman Liam Doran described the strike as "a watershed in nursing", but said it would take some time to explain the details to members. The headquarters of Doran's own union, the Irish Nurses Organisation, which represents the majority of nurses, was inundated with faxes from strike committees calling for pickets to continue while balloting took place. Nurses on some picket lines were demanding all-out strike last night.

The unions were keen to get the nurses' strike off the agenda in advance of discussions with government on a successor to Partnership 2000. The so-called social partnership is a corporatist agreement between trade unions, government and employers to hold down wages, taxes and public spending. It has been widely credited with forming the bedrock of the success of the Irish economy on the world market.

The specific role of the unions in the agreement is to strangle any industrial action. It is this that accounts for the fall in the number of workdays lost due to strikes from 316,000 a year up to 1987 to 110,000 in 1996. The unions are keen to ensure that when Partnership 2000 runs out at the end of the year, a new set-up is

worked out in which they are incorporated.

The ballot votes are to be counted on November 5, the same day that the Irish Congress of Trade Unions is holding a special delegate conference to work out what will replace Partnership 2000.



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