

Irish hospitals hit by first national nurses' strike

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The Irish Republic was hit on Tuesday by the biggest strike in its history, as 27,500 nurses began indefinite strike action over pay and working conditions.

Members of all four nursing unions backed the strike by massive majorities on October 11. They rejected an offer by the Labour Court (a cross union-government body) for an Ir£60 million pay deal (£49 million), which the government claimed amounted to a 23 percent rise on basic salaries.

The largest union, the Irish Nurses Organisation, voted 96 percent in favour of strike action. Paramedics IMPACT and the Psychiatric Nurses Association members backed the action by 89 percent, while the professional union SIPTU members voted 82 percent in favour.

The votes reflect growing resentment throughout the public sector towards the "social contract", which has been in place since 1987. This tripartite partnership between the government, employers and the unions has been credited with playing the key role in Ireland's economic success over the past period.

The "Partnership 2000" deal, which ends in the New Year, has kept wages down in return for tax cuts. The unions argue that this had led to a systematic drop in nurses' earnings in comparison with other sectors. The average difference in hourly rate for nursing grades is £2.09 below comparative sections, and for a ward sister is £2.75 below.

From Tuesday morning, more than 1,000 pickets were dispatched to health sites across the country, including hospitals, blood transfusion centres and old people's homes. All non-emergency operations have been cancelled and doctors have had to take over nurses' tasks. Health workers have pledged to continue emergency cover, despite a decision that workers would not be paid for such work. Many Dublin hospitals are

reliant on a skeleton staff.

In a press statement the Southern Health Board, which covers Cork and Kerry, said that all non-emergency admissions, day-care services and community nursing services have been cancelled. At the biggest hospital in the region, Cork University Hospital, 90 of 550 beds have been closed. The number of nurses on duty has been reduced to 70, just over a quarter of the normal figure. At Tralee General Hospital, 64 of 324 beds have been closed. Nurses on duty have fallen from 140 to just 55 since the strike began.

The same picture can be seen at hospitals throughout the country. Only a handful of nurses turned up for work at three of the Midlands' acute General Hospitals. In the southeast, just over a quarter of the 2,450 nurses normally on duty were working.

The strike has received widespread public sympathy. At picket lines outside hospitals, people passing on public transport waved to the pickets, motorists honked horns and pedestrians stopped to wish the nurses well. While cautious in the face of this public support, the Ahern government is resisting any settlement that goes outside the established framework of social partnership. To this end there have been frantic discussions between government and union representatives. Leaders of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) met the four nurses' unions on Tuesday afternoon to explore possibilities for a framework for talks. Health Minister Brian Cowen said that the ICTU could now have a key role in the effort to end the dispute.



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