

Hundreds of thousands in Ireland's largest public sector strike since 2009

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More than 300,000 public sector workers struck across the Republic of Ireland on Wednesday in a 24-hour walkout over pay. It was the country's largest strike since 2009, when mass protests and a one-day public sector stoppage erupted against the austerity imposed after the 2008-9 global financial crash.

Teachers, nurses, doctors, civil servants and council workers walked out. *The Journal* reported unions suggesting numbers participating could reach around 400,000.

The strike was called by the Public Services Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), covering 19 unions. They include the Fórsa union, with over 100,000 public sector members; SIPTU (75,000 public service members), the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO), the teachers' unions and the Unite union.

Pickets were held in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford and 100 towns and cities. Schools were shut across the country. Tens of thousands of hospital appointments were cancelled, with only emergency cover in place. Pickets were mounted at courts, revenue offices, and Leinster House, the parliament building, where civil servants joined the strike. Dublin City Council said its staff "will not be available to empty litter bins or to clean streets, parks and public spaces."

The overwhelming support for the strike was expressed in a series of ballots. SIPTU announced on August 31 that 97 percent of those voting backed strike action. Fórsa followed on September 1 with 96.6 percent in favour, and by September 9 the INMO had reported a vote of more than 99 percent. At the end of September, more than 100,000 workers, including nurses, school staff and civil servants, moved to a work-to-rule. Primary and secondary teachers followed at the start of October.

In the face of this overwhelming mandate, union leaders called just one day of strike action. A second, on October 21, was first mooted by INTO on September 25 and then confirmed union by union, with the INTO, ASTI and SIPTU only finally doing so between October 6 and 9.

The strike stemmed from the expiry in June of the

30-month Public Service Agreement. The Fianna Fáil–Fine Gael government refused—despite the pleas of the union leaderships—to settle pay first, insisting it be negotiated alongside “reform” and hikes in productivity. On October 6, outlining the budget for 2027, the government set aside just €1.2 billion for pay—which the *Irish Times* calculated as a pay deal of a below inflation 3 to 3.5 percent. Inflation hit 4.1 percent in September; as home heating oil rose by 58 percent in a year.

In a letter to ICTU on Monday, Public Expenditure Minister (Fianna Fáil) Jack Chambers described the paltry €1.2 billion allocation as “significant”, insisting “pay issues can and should be discussed as a priority alongside other matters as part of the pay talks.”

The agreement, covering January 2024 to the end of June 2026, provided general pay increases over seven rounds totalling 9.25 percent, plus 1 percent through local bargaining. Just one example showing that that workers haven't seen any benefits are the members of the Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland. The union told the *Irish Times* on August 31 that the two 1 percent rises paid in 2026 had “already been cancelled out by inflation”.

Central Statistics Office figures show wages massively falling behind prices. Between June 2021 and June 2026, consumer prices rose 24.5 percent. Mortgage interest repayments rose 91.5 percent, electricity, gas and other fuels 69.8 percent, rents 39.5 percent and food 26.4 percent. Renters, under-35s and the poorest quarter of households were among the hardest hit.

A Red C poll for the National Youth Council of Ireland found 68 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds were considering emigration.

While noting the widening gap between pay and inflation of “between 5 and 7 per cent”, the unions have tabled no public pay demand. Union sources instead told *The Journal* that “the lowest they will accept is a 5% increase”, barely above current inflation.

On Monday, the ICTU Public Services Committee, chaired by Fórsa general secretary Kevin Callinan, rejected

Chambers' invitation to talks at the Workplace Relations Commission—the state's industrial relations body. But on RTÉ's *Prime Time* on Tuesday, Chambers said talks could begin with pay with Callinan responding that this could "give some ground for optimism." SIPTU Deputy General Secretary Adrian Kane told *The Journal* that the question was "repeatedly put" to Chambers: "Eventually he acquiesced... It is better late than never." Callinan previously called on Taoiseach [Prime Minister] Micheál Martin to intervene, and Kane for "senior political intervention."

As the strike began, Callinan declared there might be a "pathway to talks" if the government were willing to put pay at the centre of negotiations. "The ball is in the Government's court," he said. "Obviously, if that's possible, we'll work with it."

In the October 6 budget, Tánaiste (deputy prime minister) and Finance Minister Simon Harris (Fine Gael) laid down the strict fiscal framework for any deal. "We must plan for a future in which the public finances will not always look like they do now," he said.

Fearful of Ireland losing its position as a preferred European HQ of the largest corporations, Harris declared that budget surpluses of €6.7 billion this year and €9.5 billion in 2027 would be run "so that we do not spend tax revenues that cannot be relied upon in the future on day-to-day spending." Corporation tax receipts reached €39.1 billion in 2024, swollen by one-off receipts from the Apple tax case, and €32.9 billion in 2025, almost a third of the €105.7 billion tax take.

The public sector had to be reformed based on "Increased efficiency, improved productivity, better value for money," insisted Harris. He has cut capital gains tax from 33 to 31 percent, hailing "small business owners, risk takers and entrepreneurs" as "the bedrock of our economy."

Chambers declared that "concentration of corporation tax receipts" was "a significant vulnerability," and relying on them for permanent spending "would be akin to writing cheques today that we may not be able to pay tomorrow." He announced a Public Spending Efficiency Taskforce "to extensively scrutinise day to day public spending", calling on the ICTU bureaucrats to re-engage "as a matter of urgency" with the priority "standing down the ongoing industrial action."

Workers fighting for pay, jobs and pensions confront not only Martin, Chambers and Harris but the opposition parties and the entire trade union bureaucracy.

On Tuesday, Sinn Féin leader Mary Lou McDonald attacked Martin stating workers had "been left with no choice other than to strike because your government has failed to do its job." Her main demand was that Martin "intervene constructively" to prevent strikes from going

ahead. "Lift the phone to the unions. Tell them that you will enter talks with pay as the priority and the first item on the agenda."

McDonald put forward no pay figure addressing workers' needs, made no mention of the miserable €1.2 billion allocation, and called for no inroads into the vast profits of the corporation tax and banks. Begging for a negotiated outcome, she took up Martin's remark the previous week that "people want industrial action, irrespective of what happens," replying, "But that's not true."

People Before Profit (PBP), a pseudo-left coalition dominated by the sister organisation of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) in the UK, works with Sinn Féin in the "Affordable Ireland" campaign. This seeks to promote the credentials of an alternative 'left' government around Sinn Féin while channelling class tensions towards limited protests.

PBP described the one-day strikes called by the union leaderships "a good start," urging escalation towards "an all-out strike that would close down the country." Ignoring the class war offensive of the coalition, PBP stated, "There is more money there", proposing a 10 percent pay increase for those earning under €100,000. Its only criticism of the union leaders was a warning against de-escalating "too early to allow for talks on the Government's terms."

Advocating open meetings "to give rank and file members a real say", what this meant was clear in their main conclusion that the "dispute can be used revitalise our unions", i.e., to maintain the control of the union hierarchy.

The Irish strike is part of a growing movement of workers across Europe. In France, a public sector strike on September 29 coincided with mass high school occupations. In Portugal, around 350,000 public administration workers struck on October 2, the same day as a general strike in Italy.

Irish workers must take this dispute into their own hands by building rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatus and linked through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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