

Irish union leaders call off second public sector strike to hold talks on government's terms

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Public sector union officials called off a second national strike by Ireland's public sector workers, set to start today. The first national public sector stoppage in 17 years, held October 14, was over low pay and the spiralling cost of living, and brought out more than 300,000 workers. The previous public sector pay deal expired in June.

The struggle in Ireland is part of a growing European-wide movement of workers and young people, with strikes in Portugal and Italy, mass housing protests in Spain, and high school strikes and protests in France and Belgium.

Within two days of the first strike, the Public Services Committee (PSC) of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), covering 19 unions, agreed to "suspend" the second strike after discussions with government representatives. The decision came without the Fianna Fáil–Fine Gael coalition offering a single cent more on pay.

Teachers, hospital workers, refuse collectors, civil servants and ambulance staff were among those who walked out on October 14. Fórsa, the largest public-sector union, said over 100,000 members struck at more than 7,000 workplaces.

While sanctioning the strike as a safety valve for anger from below, the union bureaucracy pleaded for talks, asking only that pay be addressed first. The government refused, insisting on negotiating pay alongside productivity and "reform". Fórsa General Secretary Kevin Callinan, who chairs the PSC, repeatedly called on Taoiseach (prime minister) Micheál Martin to intervene. The morning after the strike, he declared it "reasonable to allow a little bit of space" for the government, adding that the Taoiseach "know[s] how to contact me".

The *Irish Times* reported the suspension was "brokered

after back-channel communications between Government and unions". A government source told the *Business Post* that a call on October 15 between Callinan and Minister for Public Expenditure Jack Chambers was "the key moment". On October 16, Martin, while at a European Council summit in Brussels, phoned Callinan to sanction talks.

The unions presented the outcome as a government climbdown, with SIPTU's Adrian Kane saying the strike had "concentrated minds". Callinan told RTÉ, "I believe now that the Government have been listening. Obviously, we need to test that in practice in a talks process."

This concealed the government's hardline agenda as Martin set out the talks' strict parameters on October 18: "Obviously there has to be value for money, there has to be productivity and all of that, and that has always been our position." On Monday, Chambers said the government wanted to "drive productivity and reform through a pay agreement, and that's understood by all sides", describing the €1.2 billion set aside for pay in the October 6 budget as a starting point.

A three-person panel agreed the framework for talks at the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC). Established in 2015, alongside the Labour Court, the WRC is part of the state machinery through which the union bureaucracy and employers police the working class.

The Minister for Enterprise appoints the WRC's board. Its members include former union bureaucrat George Maybury and Rachel Ryan, head of legal rights at SIPTU, alongside senior figures from Deloitte Ireland, the US pharmaceutical multinational Eli Lilly, University College Cork and Stratis Consulting, whose managing partner Brendan McGinty is a former industrial relations director at employers' group Ibec.

The government appointed Kevin Foley as “independent chair” to oversee the talks. He is a former Labour Court chairman (2016-2025) with more than two decades of experience at the Labour Relations Commission. In 2025, he chaired a government-appointed forum on cutting businesses’ non-wage costs. ICTU General Secretary Owen Reidy represents the unions, while the government is represented by Oonagh Buckley, a senior civil servant and former WRC director general.

The Unite union, with around 4,000 public sector workers, initially voted against suspending the strike, with Deputy Regional Secretary Tom Fitzgerald telling members the government had “still not come forward with an offer on pay”. On Monday, it accepted the WRC talks.

Union leaders have signed up in advance to a mechanism for imposing a settlement. The panel’s joint statement stipulated that if talks reached an impasse, it would act “at the request of the WRC” to “put forward a means of resolution which should be accepted by the parties”.

The government is floating an additional €400 million, which would raise the pay allocation from €1.2 billion to €1.6 billion. But this would see the government save hundreds of millions. As Callinan complained—even as he backed the talks—the trailing of revised figures is “to try to get people to forget that the Government was talking about €2 billion [for pay] a few weeks ago.”

Arriving at the talks on Monday, Callinan accepted the government’s framework, saying, “Any pay negotiation has a cost-of-living element and usually a productivity element”. Asked whether a token work-to-rule still in place could be lifted, he replied, “We’ve made our gesture: We’ve suspended the strike on Wednesday.”

Irish Times columnist Stephen Collins spoke for the ruling class with an article headlined: “Unsustainable pay increases for public sector workers will put Ireland’s stability at risk”. He called for “strong nerves” on the government side, urging it to “hold the line against excessive demands that are not accompanied by changes in work practices”.

He portrayed a public sector workforce luxuriating in splendour, asserting “excessive public sector pay awards in the early years of this century played a central role in triggering the 2008 financial crash.” That year’s global crash was driven by a property and credit bubble, inflated by banks and speculators. The state guaranteed the banks’ debts, imposing years of brutal austerity to recoup billions handed over to the rich—a process facilitated by the union

bureaucracy.

Business Post columnist Shane Coleman noted October 18 that Ireland’s union leaders are “not wild-eyed Arthur Scargill-style militants gagging to take on, or take out, the establishment”, concluding, “If the government does a deal with the unions, the unions will stick to that deal and won’t keep coming back for more.”

The ruling elite and trade union officials know they are sitting on a social powder keg. Pay has fallen behind inflation by 5 to 7 percent since 2021, with inflation at 4.1 percent in September, up from 3.7 percent in August. Housing prices in Ireland are the highest in the European Union, at 190 percent of the EU average. Housing costs and utilities, including rents, mortgage interest and energy, rose 9.5 percent in the year to September.

Michael Doherty, professor of law at Maynooth University, warned that “the Government may have got a shock by the number of young, enthusiastic people getting a first taste of industrial action on the pickets and anxious to be heard”. The unions, he said, “are going to have to be very careful because there is the possibility they [members] won’t want to accept some sort of fudge, that they’ll feel, ‘Hold on, you marched us up the hill here’.”

Irish Times Political Editor Pat Leahy stated that within the coalition, one position was that the union leaders needed a “day out” to show “their determination and their willingness to go all the way to strike action”. But “nobody, it seems, wanted two days out. Or at least, nobody at leadership level did.” Leahy warned, “A protracted period on the picket lines can harden attitudes and make the eventual compromise—if and when it comes—harder to sell.”

The PSC’s suspension of this week’s public sector strike is preparation for betrayal. The union bureaucracy is working with the government to impose a deal that will cut pay and boost productivity. Workers must take the initiative and form rank-and-file committees in every workplace. The resources for decent wages, healthcare, housing, and education exist, but they must be freed from the grip of the financial aristocracy. This means developing a unified struggle by workers across Europe against austerity and war, and for socialism.



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