

News Industrial strife

IN a well-known hostelry on Dublin's Northside, several members of the GRA Central Executive Committee (CEC) discuss, over a few pints, the magnitude of what they are about to do.

It's Wednesday night and less than 36 hours before the most significant strike in the history of the State is due to begin.

Some of those present have endured sleepless nights, others have held lengthy conversations with their loved-ones about the prospect of being docked pay.

Above all, each and every one of the gardaí present have agonised over whether their actions would result in members of the public being harmed.

They have wrestled with the prospect of crimes taking place that may be avoided if the strike is called off. But among the many sub-plots that are discussed, one causes particular anger.

The gardaí present speak of the various text messages they have received from probationary officers, the newest, youngest and most inexperienced members of the force.

These individuals had earlier received their pay slips – which stated they owed hundreds of euro back to the State that was paid in error.

This treatment of the force's young officers encouraged many of the gardaí present that they needed to stand together.

They went their separate ways, in agreement that they would remain resolute.

There was a consensus that the strike must go ahead.

While the Wednesday night gathering was taking place, the union's officer board – led by its president Ciarán O'Neill and general secretary Pat Ennis – were having a different type of conversation entirely.

They were preparing

Niall O'Connor



for a meeting at Garda Headquarters the following morning aimed at averting Friday's day of action.

The meeting itself had not been flagged with the wider executive, the reasons for which are unknown.

This marked the beginning of a chasm within the leadership of the GRA that would only grow further as the hours went by.

In Garda HQ, the GRA officer board sit down for their showdown talks.

Well-placed sources they were told in "no uncertain terms" about the prospect of public order being seriously breached.

Deputy Garda Commissioner Dónall Ó Cualáin and Assistant



Commissioner Eugene Corcoran – who was placed in charge of the contingency plans – urged a resolution.

They emphasised the dire need to avoid any course of action that could encourage organised crime.

The prospect of foreign ambassadors being targeted was also mentioned.

But above all, the senior gardaí did not want the meeting to end without securing one highly significant commitment from the GRA: a derogation.

According to sources, such a proposal had been tabled on three occasions in recent weeks – and rejected each time.

But with the strike now just hours away, the union leadership consented to the demands of Garda management.

A total of 18 specialist units would be exempt from the strike action, meaning the State would avoid an emergency situation and be sufficiently policed.

The move was a game changer.

It stunned the wider GRA executive who insisted they did not mandate the officer board to agree to such a derogation.

The announcement of the extra cover was made at a media event at 12.30pm.

Immediately, members of the executive sent text messages to each other, furious that they had been "hoodwinked" by an officer board embarking on a "solo run".

Nonetheless, the Labour Court had yet to finalise its set of recommendations that had the ability to resolve this dispute altogether.

While the GRA executive held a further meeting at its Phibsboro headquarters, Tánaiste and Justice Minister Frances Fitzgerald attended the Newsbrand journalism awards in the Mansion House.

Publicly, she spoke about how quality journalism is vital in order to shine a light on "what is happening on our streets".

Privately, she was wondering if these same streets would be places of

darkness in just a few hours time.

As the afternoon progressed, Ms Fitzgerald was in regular contact with Public Expenditure Minister Paschal Donohoe, who was in his department considering the implications a Labour Court ruling could have on public sector pay policy.

Just a short drive away on Haddington Road, the Labour Court's chairman Kevin Foley and his team were preparing to invite back in the officer board to consider the most important

Inside the talks: how officers agonised over the most crucial ballot in the history of the force

Some of those who voted are believed to have changed their minds just minutes before... but the news was met with shock and confusion

set of proposals that will be issued in years.

These would include the introduction of a €15 payment for each day of annual leave, improvements in the rent allowance for new recruits, and the fast-tracking of parade money for the 15 minutes worked prior to the start of each shift.

The package – which is estimated to cost up to €50m – went well beyond what the Government said it was prepared to offer.

The proposals were emailed to the wider

Rank and file warned that wage proposal is a 'gimmick'

Anne-Marie Walsh and Robin Schiller

MEMBERS of the Garda Representative Association have been warned that a pay proposal they will vote on next week is a "gimmick".

Militant elements in the association are trying to discredit the Labour Court's recommendation to settle the dispute.

An internal message sent to members of the association warns that pay figures were being presented to make it look like they were getting a better deal than the Luas and Dublin Bus drivers, but they were not.

It noted that they "went looking for 16pc" and the Luas and Dublin Bus drivers got 12pc over three years.

It tells gardaí that the proposal by the court's chairman Kevin Foley looks better on paper than it really is and they would only enjoy a moderate pay increase of 2.7pc.

But it warns that they would be presented with claims that they would get a 14.5pc pay rise.

It says that the court's proposal of a €500 increase in their rent allowance equals a 12.5pc increase in the allowance, but a pay rise of just 1.2pc. The €500 increase will boost the current

allowance of €4,115 to €4,615.

"If it is then incorporated into salary, it will be perceived to be a 10.8pc increase in our salary," says the message. "Realistically speaking, it won't because we lose the allowance."

"However, it will forever be referred to as an increase for any future wage negotiations."

However, it does not refer to the knock-on effect of increasing the rent allowance on overtime and premium payments.

The message calculates that a payment given for each day of annual leave would equal a 1.2pc wage hike, while rent allowance changes would equal

1.5pc, a total pay hike of 2.7pc.

It says it has not included a new payment for holding briefings 15 minutes before shifts, known as parade time, as "this is an increase in workload". It says the parade payment is "sold" as a 2.5pc salary increase.

"It's not an increase in pay," says the message. "Figures are being used cleverly as it would appear we get a better deal than Luas and buses."

One source close to the garda association said the rank and file were not happy about the parade payment.

"They already have the longest working week in the public

service which just got longer," they said. "It's not a pay restoration if you're working extra hours for extra money."

The proposal in the recommendation to give gardaí a €15 premium payment per annual leave day is recommended as an acknowledgement of the uncertainty of their leave. It says this was due to the fact they must attend court hearings even at short notice when on approved leave.

It says other issues including the demand for a 39-hour week and a new formula for calculating overtime should be subject to further talks.



Kevin Foley, chairman of the Labour Court



A garda on duty outside the Dáil on Kildare Street yesterday. Photo: Steve Humphreys

'Floodgates open' to pay claims after gardaí offered special deal

Anne-Marie Walsh, Niall O'Connor and Cormac McQuinn

THE floodgates may have opened to public servants' pay claims after gardaí were offered a package worth up to €50m to call off a potentially catastrophic strike.

Unions have now upped the ante in staking a claim to more pay rises, just a day after the Labour Court proposed a deal worth up to €3,639 per garda.

The Government faces the threat of further industrial unrest after unions accused it of breaching the Lansdowne Road Agreement.

Taoiseach Enda Kenny tried to defend the wage pact with State employees, which commits to moderate pay rises and says there should be no cost-increasing claims. He warned there was no "endless pot of money".

Last night, Public Expenditure Minister Paschal Donohoe told the *Irish Independent* that the Garda proposal would impact on next year's Budget.

"This Labour Court arbitration will have consequences for spending plans for next year. There is no endless supply of money to deal with this, and I will be working with Cabinet to deal with these issues," he said.

Mr Donohoe will brief his Cabinet colleagues on the impact of the proposal, with Government sources expressing concern that it will open the floodgates to a wave of new pay claims. One senior source admitted that the Government was extremely surprised by the scale of the recommendations.

"This will have huge implications. It has created serious problems for the Government," the source said.

The Central Executive Committee of the GRA will meet on Monday to decide if further strikes will go ahead. It will also start balloting members next week.



Public Expenditure Minister Paschal Donohoe said the garda proposal would impact on next year's Budget

The size of the pay package on offer to 12,580 members of the GRA and the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors has caused union outrage.

The leader of the Civil, Public and Services Union Eoin Ronayne said the potential for industrial action would increase the longer it took the Government to get into talks.

"The danger for the Government is that unless it is prepared to extend the same benefits to other public servants, people will work out for themselves that the only reason the gardai secured the deal is that they were prepared to take industrial action," he said. "And the logical extension is other unions will take that route."

The largest public sector union, Impact, said the Garda deal "goes beyond the Lansdowne Road Agreement and therefore

represents a material change in the situation".

The Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors' National Executive is meeting early next week and will issue ballots to members following the meeting.

Further strikes are scheduled for November 11, 18 and 25. But the next two strikes are unlikely to go ahead, as strikes have been suspended to allow balloting to take place.

Sources said ratification of the Garda proposal is by no means a foregone conclusion, as militant Central Executive Committee members are actively campaigning against it.

Fianna Fáil said it looked likely that talks on a successor deal may have to start much earlier than planned.

The threat of a deluge of pay claims comes as a widespread and indefinite school shutdown appears inevitable next week in a row over teachers' pay. The Government is likely to face greater pressure from the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI) to meet its demands following the success of the garda's ultimatum.

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform would not say what the cost of the Labour Court recommendation would be. But sources said the deal is expected to cost in the region of €50m, although calculations are being finalised.

GRA executive at 5.45pm. Three hours later – and back at Garda HQ – Garda Commissioner Nóirín O'Sullivan was preparing to brief members of the media. There would be gardaí in every district of the country, she insisted, adding that communities needed to work together.

But as the 11th hour neared, the 27 member GRA executive were preparing for the most important ballot they will ever cast. Tensions were rife within the room, emotions were running high.

Nerves increased at 10.15pm when word arrived that their colleagues in the AGSI had withdrawn their own strike threat. The GRA was now on its own.

The options facing the union were threefold: Suspend, defer or proceed with the strike.

With some members having two votes depending on the size of their district, the result was declared: 20-17 in favour of deferral. Some of those who voted are believed to have changed their minds just minutes before.

At around 11.20pm, word of the decision was communicated via text message to Government figures, Garda management and journalists.

The two people at the centre of the storm – Nóirín O'Sullivan and Frances Fitzgerald – breathed a huge sigh of relief.

But the news was met with both shock and confusion among many gardaí.

It is now over to them to decide whether to sign on the dotted line – bringing this bitter dispute to an end.

The Government faces knock-on claims and the potential collapse of the Lansdowne Road Agreement (LRA) as a direct impact of the garda pay proposals.

IMPACT

The biggest public sector union has called for the Government to make immediate arrangements to negotiate accelerated pay recovery for all public servants.

The union said in a statement: "It is in the best interests of all public servants – the weakest as well as the strongest – that their pay and working conditions are negotiated collectively."

What the unions say

PDFORRA

PDFORRA represents thousands of Defence Forces personnel and has called for access to the State mediation bodies. General secretary Gerry Rooney has written to Defence Minister Paul Kehoe. "It's unconscionable to grant access to those (garda) groups and not to grant it to PDFORRA," he said.

Siptu

The country's largest union said the Labour Court ruling represented "opportunities" for certain public sector workers. Vice-president Gene Mealy said: "We are in the process of evaluating the Labour Court recommendation in respect of the Garda Síochána. Clearly, the recommendation presents opportunities and expectations among some public sector workers."

Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO)

The union has demanded immediate discussion of pay policy with the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) and described the Lansdowne Road Agreement as

"untenable". "They've changed parameters. My members expect health service management to show the same degree of imagination," the organisation's general secretary Liam Doran said. "The LRA hasn't got any tenure or strength behind it and was essentially rewritten on Thursday night."

The Association of Higher Civil and Public Servants (AHCPS)

The union has called on the Government to accelerate the process of pay restoration and earlier engagement for a successor to the Lansdowne Road Agreement. General secretary Ciaran Rohan

Mandy Johnston

Nobody won any medals in this debacle

– p27



said: "Our members have suffered cuts to their salaries of up to 23pc and average net pay levels are the same as they were over 13 years ago."

Unite

The union called for an "extraordinary" meeting of ICTU to renegotiate the Lansdowne Road Agreement "in light of the recent developments".

Regional co-ordinating officer Richie Browne said: "It is clear that the Lansdowne Road Agreement is not delivering for workers and must be replaced with a new agreement. Depending on the outcome of the Extraordinary General Meeting of the ICTU's Public Services

Committee, Unite's agreement can be revisited, reconsidered and reversed."

The Civil Public and Services Union (CPSU)

The union has made similar calls for a meeting to reassess the collective union strategy on pay conditions and restoration of pay cuts.

General secretary Eoin Ronayne said that while the union would have to study the offer made to the garda associations, its members would want to be afforded the same "flexibilities within the LRA" that were identified this week.

Robin Schiller