Pay increase secured for student nurses

Last week, Monday 22 February, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform announced that they would make funds available to increase the wages of fourth year student nurses and midwives. This was part of a deal reached with the Department of Health during Landsdowne Road Agreement talks in December last year. This will come into effect from the beginning of March.

During the crisis, several cuts were made in the sector. In 2010, the payment for clinical placement was phased out by the then-government. In 2011, students’ pay was held at 50% of the first point of the staff nurses scale (around €6.86 per hour). In 2013, this was increased to 55%, established by the trainee rates in the Minimum Wage legislation.

Currently, student nurses are being paid below minimum wage. This will be increased to €9.48 per hour. This represents a 15% increase, to 70% of the first point on the staff nurses pay scale. Once they graduate, they will receive the first point wage for sixteen weeks, at which stage they will progress to the second point of the scale. This amounts to €29,497 annually. There will also be a reintroduction of incremental credit for the 36-week work placement for those now entering the position.

The cost of the increase is set to be €3.5m for 2016 and €4.8m for a full year proceeding it.

SIPTU’s Nursing Sector said that they will continue to campaign for the reintroduction of the incremental credit for students that graduated between 2011 and 2015.

Fewer industrial disputes in 2015

The number of days lost to industrial action dropped between 2014 and 2015. In total, 32,964 days were lost last year. This is down from 44,015 in 2014.

In 2014, 11 cases of industrial action affected 31,665 workers. However, last year a smaller number of disputes (9) affected 37,760 workers. This means that 2015’s disputes saw a lower mean number of days lost per worker in the disputes.

The majority of the days lost were concentrated in Q1 and Q2 of the year, with only 116 occurring in Q4 and none occurring in Q3. Three of the disputes were in the Education sector, accounting for 23,960 days lost, a total of 73% of the total days lost.

A dispute in the wholesale and retail sector accounted for 6,000 workers affected, and 2,678 days lost. Some 4,000 transport and storage workers were also affected, and lost 5,714 days during the year.

The figure in 2015 is a drastic increase over the figures in 2009, the highest year in the last eight. The number of days lost in 2009 was 329,706.
Landlords legally bound to accept rent allowance

Landlords will not be able to deny applicants a tenancy based on their receipt of rent allowance, according to the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC). It is now the legal responsibility of landlords and accommodation advertisers to ensure they stop this practice immediately.

A new “housing assistance” ground has been added to the Equal Status Act 2000—2015; this includes anyone receiving rent supplement, housing assistance, or other social welfare payments. The Chief Commissioner of the IHREC, Emily Logan, said that this addition was “a significant step in recognising socio-economic status as a protected ground under equality law.”

He went on further to say, “We are concerned that landlords and accommodation advertisers may be unaware of this important change, and may be in breach of the new equality law by continuing to specify that rent supplement is not accepted for accommodation purposes.” Therefore, the Commission will be writing to parties concerned in the matter, outlining in detail the legal protections for those on state support payments. This is also available on www.ihrec.ie.

While this is good news for tenants, it is not as eagerly welcomed by employees at the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC). The IHREC has released information to say that those tenants who wanted to bring a case against a tenancy provider for discrimination based on socio-economic grounds should bring their case to the WRC. However, the Director General of the WRC, Kieran Mulvey has said that the cases had been inappropriately “off-loaded” on his organisation. He has commented that this is “not a workplace issue”, and would be better dealt with by the Private Residential Tenancies Board.

At the moment, those bringing such discrimination complaints will not get a court date for their case until next year. Mr Mulvey asked, “What good is that to someone who’s trying to get a home?”

Seanad election forthcoming

The 31st Dáil was dissolved by the President on 3 February. This means that the General Election to the Seanad is forthcoming. As established in law, the date of the election for the lower house will take place no more than 90 days after the dissolution of the Dáil. Therefore, it will take place no later than 3 May 2016.

At this time, 11 seats will be appointed by the new Taoiseach, six seats will be voted for by universities, and 43 seats will be given to members of vocational groups. The latter 43 will be voted for by an electorate composed of TDs, senators and local councillors.

The Standards in Public Office Commission (SIPOC) has just released its guidelines for the election. They can be found on the Commission’s website; they include information about appropriate donations and how to use them, loans, correct documentation, and offences and penalties.
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The 31st Dáil has been dissolved by the President.

The President will summon the new Dáil on Thursday 10th March 2016.

Seanad Éireann adjourned sine die.

Following the dissolution of the Dáil, Dáil committees and Joint committees are also dissolved.