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‘We have a clear mandate’ – school secretaries and caretakers set to strike after summer break

Anne-Marie Walsh

4–5 minutes

Primary and secondary school students face the threat of significant disruption as over 2,000 secretaries and caretakers prepare for an indefinite strike after the summer break.

Concerns have been raised that industrial action from the first day of the new school term on August 28 could affect opening hours.

The school secretaries and caretakers want pensions and similar working entitlements to public servants.

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Andy Pike, Fórsa national secretary, told politicians yesterday that the action will cause disruption if it goes ahead.

At the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Youth yesterday, Mr Pike said this would be the fault of those who had not allowed secretaries and caretakers into the public service pay system.

“Some school principals have written to us to say they are worried about being able to open without the school secretary or caretaker,” he said.

“Others are concerned that other staff will refuse to cross the picket line. Some schools would cope reasonably well, but others will have real problems as operations are channelled through the secretary’s office.”

Today's News in 90 Seconds - July 11th

Mr Pike told the committee that secretaries and caretakers have been exploited for decades and that the time is right to go on strike.

“We have a clear and strong mandate for the strike which will commence on the morning of August 28 with a national rally on Merrion Street outside the offices of the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform,” he said.

He claimed the department has refused to discuss pension access and said that from September 1, members will picket outside schools.

An “information note” sent by the Department of Education and Youth to principals last month said: “The department understands that this is a matter of significant concern for schools. The department will continue to engage with the relevant stakeholders and will, in August, provide an update for schools on the situation.”

Sinn Féin TD Darren O’Rourke. Photo: Collins

The school secretaries do not have public servant status, but moved on to a public payroll under an agreement two years ago. This means they do not have access to the Single Public Service Pension Scheme. They also want improved sick pay and bereavement leave.

A Fórsa spokesperson said caretakers are waiting for similar pay arrangements, and many earn €13 an hour.

If the industrial action takes place, it will affect most non-ETB (education and training board) schools. He said secretaries at ETB schools have full public service employment status, including pensions.

The Department of Education and Youth said it recognised the concerns and is committed to maintaining “open lines of communication with all stakeholders including Fórsa”.

“We are actively working with our education partners on putting in place contingency arrangements to minimise disruption and support the continuity of learning for all students,” a spokesperson said.

They said the department “recognises the vitally important role of secretaries and caretakers” and that the granting of public servant status to secretaries was “not a matter that any one Department can decide unilaterally”.

David Hearne, from the union’s school caretakers branch, told the committee they do not want to go on strike but felt there was no alternative.

“The start of the school year is just as important to us as it is to the parents and the new students coming in,” he said.

Social Democrats TD Jen Cummins said she had been a member of the school completion branch of Fórsa, and fully supported the strike.

“Yes, there will be huge disruption, that’s the point of a strike,” she said. “People need to know this is the end of the road, strike action.”

Sinn Féin TD Darren O’Rourke said when his children are learning their letters, ‘b’ is for Bernard, the school caretaker. “That just happens organically or naturally because he’s at the heart of everything in the school,” he said.

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