

Fórsa instructs civil service members to stick with current hybrid working arrangements

Largest public service union pushes back against unilateral moves by departments of Finance and Social Protection to reduce number of remote workdays

“New ways of working are at risk of being eliminated by old ways of thinking”

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Ireland’s largest public service union has instructed its civil service members in the Department of Finance and the Department of Social Protection (DSP) to continue to work their current hybrid working arrangements.

The union issued the instruction last night (Thursday) in response to staff directives, issued by both departments, to increase the number of office workdays from next week.

It is the first instance in which the Government has rolled back remote working arrangements for its own staff, following the recent publication of the new Programme for Government, which commits the new administration to a review of remote and blended work policies.

The issue was raised by unions in a meeting with the DSP on Monday (27th) and at a meeting of the Civil Service General Council on Wednesday (29th January), the main union/employer forum.

In the union’s note of instruction issued to members, Fórsa’s deputy general secretary Éamonn Donnelly said the departments involved had acted unilaterally and had failed to honour the terms of the 2022 Blended Working Policy Framework, which provides for an ongoing review of blended working arrangements.

Mr Donnelly said: “These changes, which significantly disadvantage workers, are scheduled to be introduced during the first week in February. No prior consultation or discussion took place with Fórsa on this matter. This lack of engagement is in clear breach of the Framework Agreement and is also in clear breach of the Public Service Agreement 2024 to 2026.

“We are now entering into a serious - and avoidable - dispute. These measures have been introduced with little thought for the consequences.

“At a meeting on Monday (27th January), we asked the DSP for the type of analytics applied in its review of blended working, and the department confirmed no analytics were used, and said it did not see any requirement to consult with trade unions.

“By forcing people to attend for an additional day each week, with no evidence to support a business case for this, management are just dumping an arbitrary obligation on staff.

“Fórsa has instructed members in both departments to continue working as usual and we’ve raised the matter with the Department of Public Expenditure.

“We are now entering into a serious dispute that concerns the unilateral alteration of the Blended Working Policy to the disadvantage of workers, without discussion, analytics or consultation.

“However, in this instance, the behaviour of the DSP has significantly broadened the dispute. Quite simply, the DSP has set about achieving a deliberate attack on workers terms and conditions and has done so without any negotiation with the trade union. No union could or should tolerate such a circumstance,” he said.

He added that preparation for a protective ballot for industrial action, should any members be threatened with disciplinary action for complying with the union instruction, is now underway.

Mr Donnelly said current hybrid working arrangements were crucial to reducing congestion, emissions and easing pressure on workers with caring responsibilities: “Employers have a choice. Do they want staff working productively in a remote location, or do they place a higher value on staff spending that same time commuting to and from the office?”

“There was only one real positive to emerge from the global pandemic, and that was the revelation that there are other productive and beneficial ways of working. An arbitrary return to the office suggests that new ways of working are at risk of being eliminated by old ways of thinking,” he said.

In a bulletin to union members last week, Fórsa general secretary Kevin Callinan, responding to the new Programme for Government, said remote working is now a well-established fact of working life for many across the public and civil service, while global research suggests productivity remains strong: “Remote working plays a very significant role in helping workers to strike a decent balance between work and home responsibilities, including caregiving, in addition to helping ease pressure on transport infrastructure and emissions reduction.”

“While the new US administration has issued an executive order forcing federal workers back to full-time office attendance - and there have been attempts to make remote/hybrid working a ‘culture war’ issue in the UK - the debate in Ireland has, so far, been more measured, and the experience has been significantly beneficial for Irish society, so there is no need for an arbitrary full-time return to the office in those circumstances,” he said.

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