



Deals for gardai, nurses as Croke Park II edges closer

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and Tom Brady

AGREEMENT on Croke Park II is edging closer as the Government tactic of striking a series of side deals with public sector unions appears to be paying off.

The Coalition is set to give the country's industrial relations trouble-shooter extra time to continue talks as a number of potential breakthroughs emerged.

Health unions, who represent the sector where the bulk of savings must be found, said progress had been made as they adjourned late last night - with more talks now due in a fortnight. In the meantime, a working group will observe two hospitals to evaluate where savings can be made.

Following intensive negotiations, key sectors seem to be ready to sign up to agreements tailored to their areas, including:

- An independent review of garda pay and allowances.
- A chance for nurses to avoid cuts to premium pay and other rates if they return to a 39-hour week.
- Watering down of plans to halt increments and pledges to reverse pay cuts at higher levels in the future.

Labour Relations Commission chief executive Kieran Mulvey will continue talks today after being given more time to strike deals with other unions.

Mr Mulvey last night briefed Public Expenditure Minister Brendan Howlin on the progress of the talks.

He said that in a number of cases the talks had achieved "what we would describe as an agreement in principle".

Rather than making a final decision today, government sources are hopeful of steady progress.

"We will take stock but I'd say Kieran Mulvey will try to keep on talking with a view to getting everyone in," a senior government source said.

Liam Doran, head of the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO), said: "There has been constructive engagement the last couple of days, a lot more to do - and both sides are committed to do it."

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Breakthrough for gardai, nurses in pay talks

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Mr Doran said many matters were still "in play" including nurses doing a longer 39-hour week in return for retaining the premium payments at double time on Sundays and a better starting salary for graduate recruits.

SIPTU is also involved in talks, but the union is regarded as complex as it represents such a wide variety of workers.

Teacher unions are balloting on industrial action later this week, so cannot talk to the LRC until that is complete.

For gardai, a major concession is the establishment of the independent review of garda pay and allowances. The decision forms the central plank of a new deal worked out by government negotiators with the force's four representative bodies.

The review will also cover a wide range of other issues, including staffing levels and industrial relations mechanisms, and its independent chairman will produce a report by next spring.

Over recent years, successive governments introduced a series of allowances for gardai because they could not sanction a rise in pay.

The idea of a pay review has the backing of the Garda Commissioner Martin Callinan.

For the first time, negotiators from the four garda bodies were given access to the Labour Relations Commission during the talks - a move long sought by the gardai.

The two main garda bodies, the Garda Representative Association (GRA), which is composed of rank and file members of the force, and the Association of Garda Sergeants and Inspectors (AGSI), walked out of talks earlier this year because they were again denied a seat at the negotiating table.

The proposals for reviewing pay and the other issues cannot be approved until a deal for the entire public sector has been negotiated. But both sides are understood to be very hopeful of reaching agreement.

Under the deal, gardai will work an additional 30 hours

each between now and the end of the year, as well as at least 30 hours extra in 2014 and 2015.

In return, cuts to their premium payments will not be as severe as had been previously planned. The rate for voluntary overtime will be reduced from time-and-a-half to time-and-a-quarter.

But the independent review will be tasked with looking at the introduction of a radical recommendation that has already been adopted successfully in the Irish Prison Service.

This would involve eliminating the current system of overtime and replacing it with "banked" hours, where staff agree in advance to work a certain number of additional hours in a year.

Overtime

The associations must give a commitment to take part in the examination of an overhaul of overtime under the overall review process.

Gardai will also agree to the extension of the new work roster on a pilot basis until July next year, when its operation will be reviewed by both sides.

It is also intended to replace the current myriad allowances