



28 September 2017

Important Information Note

Fórsa – a new, stronger union for 80,000 public servants. All members to be balloted.

Dear Member,

As you are probably aware, discussions between IMPACT Trade Union, CPSU and this union on the possible creation of a new union have been ongoing since 2012.

These discussions have now reached a conclusion and all members will be balloted on the proposals in the coming weeks. This circular is intended to convey information on what is proposed regarding a possible new union, which will be named 'Fórsa', (the Irish word for 'Force').

The full terms of the Legal Instrument of Amalgamation and the proposed rule book are available [here](#).

Why did discussions commence?

In the aftermath of the imposition on two income cuts for public servants in 2009 and 2010, a conversation began as to whether the manner in which public service unions were organised was the best means of protecting members; whether a fragmented, grade based structure in the Civil Service and organisations that grew from the Civil Service, that dates from the late 19th century was, necessarily, the best means of dealing with a single employer and whether 19 different unions across the public service was the best way of dealing with a determined single employer. At the same time, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions established a Commission on Trade Unions with a wide membership, including international members. That commission stated that the way in which public service unions were organised was serving members poorly and they recommended significant rationalisation. Specifically, they recommended, among other recommendations, that IMPACT and this union should merge. Against this background, the Executive Committee wrote to four other unions suggesting that discussions take place regarding future organisation. Two unions, the Association of Higher Civil and Public Servants and the Veterinary Officers Association, took part in the process initially and dropped out subsequently.

To do what?

All unions in the process recognised from the beginning that if any new union was to be created, it would have to be a genuine merger of equals and it would have to be designed to create something better than what is available currently. As the process developed, it became clear that there was the possibility of creating a strong national union of 80,000 plus members and that within it, there was the chance to create autonomous divisions free to conduct their own business on matters exclusive to their areas of employment. So, for instance, it will be possible to create a Civil Service Division to represent over 90% of Civil Servants, around 30,000 members, and to speak with one strong voice to the employer on issues affecting the Civil Service. From that recognition, there grew a set of proposals to create 6 largely autonomous divisions, of which the Civil Service would be joint biggest, (with Health) and, of interest to our non Civil Service members, there would be a division for services and enterprises. Divisions will be completely autonomous in respect of matters of exclusive concern to the area of employment covered by a Division, so, for instance, issues of exclusive interest to the Civil Service would be handled by the Civil Service Division in whatever manner was determined by the democratic structures in the Division.

Each of these divisions will have their own conferences, elect their own Executive Committees etc. Each division will have a dedicated staff team.

It was recognised also that pay terms and conditions of the various Civil Service grades are similar, identical in some cases, to grades in other parts of the Public Service and that progress in one part of the Public Service for a grade should, and potentially could, offer opportunities for similar progress in other parts of the Public Service.

Therefore, if, as is proposed, a new, single union is created that represents all administrative public servants, Equivalent Grade Committees will be set up to provide supports and cross sectoral opportunities on matters of common concern. In the case of members of this union, there will be an Equivalent Grade Committee or committees for the Executive level grades.

On a national level, the proposed new union will be the largest union representing public servants. It will, therefore, become the national 'go to' voice for public servants. More importantly, it would be the key player in any national Public Service negotiations. In short it would become the most powerful, the most significant and the most important union in such discussions.

But?.....

From the outset, it was recognised that the creation of a new, single, large, union would involve losses of autonomy and distinctive identity. There is no avoiding the fact that each union is currently totally free to conduct their own business both nationally and locally. Equally, it is the case that this union has always prided itself on the ease of access to Head Office assistance for members. Therefore, in approaching discussions, given the objective of creating something better for members, it was necessary to try, as far as practicable, to retain existing structures and to incorporate them into the new organisation. To that end, it is agreed that all existing branches in all three unions will be retained in the new organisation and that any future rationalisation of branches, if any, will be done with the involvement and agreement of the members concerned. To ensure that we speak with one strong voice to the employer, structures similar to existing Staff Panels will be set up in each Government Department.

With regard to service, it will continue to be the case that members will have access to Head Office assistance. In the case of the Civil Service members, this union's General Secretary will head up the Civil Service division and will have direct responsibility for service delivery in this area. He will be assisted by three deputies, 10 Assistant General Secretaries (plus four shared), 3.5 Industrial Relations Officers (plus one shared). Similarly in the Services and Enterprise Division there will be a national Head of Division, three full time and seven shared Assistant General Secretaries.

In addition, there will be a code of service obligations to members and a senior official will be appointed to deal with any complaints regarding service. If such complaints are not then resolved, members will have access to an independent Ombudsman.

While some loss of autonomy flows inevitably from a pooling of resources and sovereignty, each Division will be autonomous in respect of matters exclusive to that Division.

The intention is to replicate the service delivery to members that they associate with existing structures in the new, more powerful, union and to ensure that decision making is devolved to the most appropriate area nearest the workplace where such decisions impact.

Anything else?

The new union will have a dedicated Communications Unit with at least 5 full-time dedicated staff to handle internal communications and external public and media relations. It will be headed by PR professionals who can speak on behalf of public servants.

The new union will have a full-time organising staff to recruit new members, to organise branches and to provide training and development opportunities for activists. This will be headed by a senior official and it will have three lead organisers and, at least, 15 organisers on the ground.

There will be economies of scale as there will, over time, cease to be a need for three IT systems, three payroll systems, three membership systems etc. Any savings can be used to build capacity in delivery of service to members through expanded activist training and enhanced numbers of industrial relations and organising staff.

Subscriptions

All three unions have different subscription rates. Obviously, no union member would expect to be asked to pay more. Therefore, existing rates will be retained for those who are members on the date of establishment. In our case, existing members pay 0.62% of salary. This is guaranteed to remain unchanged unless the people concerned decide otherwise. It cannot be changed for any individual without their agreement.

All new members of the new organisation will be on a subscription rate 0.8% of salary. However, this will be 'capped' at €370 per annum.

Leadership

Initially, there will be three General Secretaries. As mentioned above, this union's General Secretary will have responsibility for the Civil Service Division. The existing CPSU General Secretary will have responsibility for the corporate aspects of the union i.e. recruitment, organising, communications, finance, legal and administration plus the Equivalent Grade Committees. The IMPACT General Secretary will be the leading General Secretary, will continue to chair the ICTU Public Services Committee, liaise with Government etc., manage the National Executive, deal with inter union relations and staffing. All three will have general industrial relations functions. This union has enjoyed the value of both the existing General Secretary and his predecessor being Secretary of the Public Services Committee and, thereby, at the heart of the core committee's negotiating group. He will continue to be a member of that group.

In time, there will be one General Secretary and two Deputy General Secretaries.

The elected leadership will be a National Executive Committee to be elected from the various Divisions. In the long term, the Civil Service Division will have six members of the 30 person National Executive and for an interim period this will be increased to 10. There will be an elected officer board at which all Divisions will be represented.

Each Division will hold delegate conferences every second year and the national conference will be held in the intervening year.

Rights/Obligations

All employment rights of existing staff of the three unions will be carried into the new union. After establishment, the staff concerned will become employees of the new union and terms and conditions will be subject to the normal employee/employer rules, including any involvement by unions representing staff. Likewise, all debts, liabilities, assets and responsibilities will carry into the new union. In this regard, it is worth noting that the new union will have a combined income of more than €20m per annum and estimated assets in excess of €80m, of which more than €50m will be held in a dispute fund for use in disputes with employers, legal cases etc. To put it at its crudest, the new union will not just have the industrial 'muscle' of large membership numbers, it will have substantial financial 'muscle' to back up this industrial strength.

Added Benefits

Because of the substantial income of the new union, it is possible to offer additional membership benefits to members to be paid out of union funds, at no extra cost to members. It will be possible to provide the following, at a cost of €1.8m per annum, out of union funds;

- €5,000 on the death of a member
- €5,000 on the death of a spouse/qualifying partner
- €5,000 personal accident cover
- €5,000 critical illness cover
- €5,000 illness benefit if out of work for more than 12 months
- Up to €250,000 repatriation costs for a member who falls ill while abroad.

This union provides currently the first two listed, (at a cost of €120,000 per annum for our 10,000 members alone). There are, of course, some conditions and these will be set out in the covering documentation for the ballot.

Some members asked if it would be possible to provide a dental and optical 'package' similar to that of the CPSU. The answer is 'yes' but to do so would require increased subscriptions. That union has a subscription rate of 1% of salary, compared to our rate of 0.62%, out of which 20% of all of that union's income is allocated to pay for those schemes. It is not feasible for us on existing subscription rates to pay for these benefits. However, the proposed 'package' of benefits in a new union is targeted to help members when they are most vulnerable and is, therefore consistent with our role as a trade union. It would not be possible financially for any of the three existing unions to provide this 'package' on their own.

With over 80,000 members, over time it will be possible to negotiate new schemes and to renegotiate and to improve benefit schemes. The sheer purchasing member of such large numbers will facilitate this.

The Executive Committee position

As stated above, this process began with the intention of creating something better and the equally clear intention that it would not be recommended to members unless the Executive Committee was satisfied that it did, indeed, represent something better than what exists currently. The matter has been discussed at a number of conferences, Branch AGMs and other meetings of members. All views have been taken on board.

The proposals regarding the retention of existing branches and the service delivery protections set out above are as a direct result of the Executive Committee taking concerns into account.

The Executive Committee has taken into account members' fears about loss of identity and ease of access to service from Head Office and these proposals seek, as far as practicable, to address those concerns, while acknowledging the undoubted fact that if the benefits of a bigger, stronger organisation are to be created, some independence has to be ceded.

All things considered, the Executive Committee feels that, notwithstanding some understandable hesitation in moving into the unknown, the interests of members will be served better for the future in a larger organisation that represents all administrative public servants, that represents more than 90% of staff in the Civil Service where most of our members work; that can provide a strong, unified union presence in state agencies and enterprises; that will have the capacity to provide professional PR and communications services for public servants; that can run an organising, recruitment and training function for members and activists; that will have a substantial 'war chest' to take on employers through industrial or legal action where necessary; that will be the 'go to' union in the public service for Government, Opposition and sectoral employers; that can provide additional

membership benefits in the short term and has the capacity to use the purchasing power of over 80,000 members in the longer run to negotiate better benefits and services for members and, above all, will have the resources, structures, processes and personnel to deliver services to members 'on the ground'. The concerns about identity are legitimate but, in the view of the Executive Committee, they are outweighed by the potential benefits. The concerns about maintenance of ease of access to Head Office are equally legitimate but every effort has been made in designing the structure and in assignment of personnel to ensure that a culture of service to members permeates the new organisation and if/when the highest of standards are not met, (as can happen in any organisation), there will be a clear and simple complaints process, means of redress and, if necessary, outside referral to an Ombudsman.

To some extent there is an element of a leap of faith in moving from the unknown to the new. A wish to hang on to what we know is understandable. However, our experience since 2009 has asked questions of our old certainties. Not every one of those questions can be answered by the creation of a new, bigger, stronger union. It is not the manufacturing of a 'magic wand'.

It is however, a unique once in a generation opportunity to create something new, something vigorous and fresh to act as a voice for public servants, to rise to the challenges and to progress the issues for public servants. Whether the issue is new entrants' pay, protecting pensions, seeking restoration of working time, restoring allowances etc. no magic wands can be promised but it is clear that we are stronger when we are together; that in numbers lies increased power and improved opportunity to advance any or all of those issues.

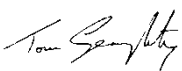
For all of these reasons, while fully cognisant of legitimate fears and concerns, the Executive Committee is persuaded that our members best interests lie in joining up in this new and exciting project and in the upcoming ballot, it will be recommending accordingly.

Next Steps

Members will receive ballot papers in the coming weeks. The intention is to try to have the ballots completed by mid-November. Each union will ballot separately. If this project is to be created in this form, all three unions will need to vote in favour. If this happens, it is proposed to create the new union from 1 January 2018.

In the meantime, if Branches wish to have an official attend a meeting with members or Branch Committee, please contact my colleague Gillian O'Sullivan at gosullivan@pseu.ie. We will try to get Head Office officials to meet as many members as possible in the coming period to explain this entire project, we look forward to meeting members and we will be communicating further with you.

Yours sincerely,



Tom Geraghty
General Secretary