

Childcare workers planning mass protest ^[1]

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The Government is facing revolt by the country's 25,000 childcare workers over demands that they continually upskill while forced to exist on "poverty pay".

A national rally is being staged on February 17 and the sector has warned there are growing demands from members for unprecedented strike action.

Anger is growing over regulations that require all employees of childcare centres - many on minimum wage or marginally above - to achieve higher levels of qualification before the end of the year without any prospect of increased pay.

Representative bodies have been flooded with accounts of workers, qualified to degree level and with many years of experience, earning just €18,000 per annum.

Others on schemes who earn only the minimum wage and are forced to sign on the dole for the summer, or self-employed workers who are unable to claim dole, are on significantly less.

"It's headline stuff," said Teresa Heeney, chief executive of Early Childhood Ireland. "The level of expectation in this sector versus the level of reward is just entirely unacceptable.

"There is a real cry from people at the moment to say that they want to strike. The sector at this stage feels that it wants to say no."

A major cause of dissatisfaction is the burden of providing the free pre-school year, which gives 15 hours' care and education a week for 38 weeks to 68,000 three- and four-year-olds.

The State only pays centres for 15 hours of direct contact with children and not for time needed for administration. Parents cannot be asked to contribute and most children with special needs can only be accommodated if centres pay for classroom assistants themselves.

"It's an enormous issue in this sector that there's absolutely no child-free hours paid for by the Government," said Ms Heeney. "There's no payment for planning, for meeting parents, for assessments and observations - all of which are required under regulations."

Marian Quinn, chair of the Association of Childhood Professionals, said the result was that some workers earned less than the statutory €8.65 per hour. "Unless something drastic is going to happen, then there is going to be a shortage of qualified, experienced people in the sector," she said. "People are leaving. They're going abroad or they're leaving the profession altogether."

Before 2010, there were no minimum qualification requirements for childcare workers so the sector has had to upskill significantly in a short period.

Around €200m in state funding for the sector was cut in 2009 when a direct payment to parents towards childcare was scrapped and replaced with the free pre-school year.

"By taking lower wages, we are subsidising childcare," Ms Quinn said.

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