

95% of gardaí backed a strike ahead of pay deal

REPRESENTATIVES for rank-and-file gardaí will today discuss a proposed pay deal with Government after it emerged that over 95% of its members had been in favour of industrial action.

The members voted before a deal was brokered between the Department of Justice and the Garda Representative Association last weekend over pay and conditions.

If the GRA members back the deal, a freeze on their pay increments will be lifted and a €4,017 rent allowance will be restored to new recruits.

The GRA, which represents 10,500 gardaí, says 66% of its membership voted in the ballot, with 95.3% backing industrial action.

Section 59 of the An Garda Síochána Act prohibits the gardaí from striking and it is also illegal

By **Darren Hassett**

to advocate their withdrawal of labour. But the GRA says it is important that all members were allowed to express their views and in August, the central executive committee decided that members should be balloted.

There is also a commitment in the draft agreement to refer the GRA's long-standing proposal that gardaí move to a 39-hour working week to a third party for an examination.

Gardaí currently work six ten-hour shifts, followed by four days off, followed by a further six ten-hour shifts.

In return, gardaí would have to back the Lansdowne Road pay agreement. Gardaí are currently receiving no increments as a consequence of their rejection

of the agreement. This affects anyone with less than 17 years' service in the force – 62% of rank-and-file gardaí.

The GRA says the ballot outcome will be discussed at a special delegate conference in Tullamore today, as well as the draft agreement brokered last week.

Ciarán O'Neill, president of the GRA, said: 'It is not surprising to hear that our members are willing to take some form of industrial action to see their pay and conditions restored.'

However while the new deal addresses the new entrant pay question, gardaí will also be carefully waiting for a development in an overall pay review which was promised under the previous Haddington Road deal but not finalised. This is now expected to be completed by Christmas.

Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

From pure evil bloomed the poetry of love

TODAY, I want to share the inspiring story of Agnes Flanagan. Agnes's grand-niece Kay Reynolds wrote to me with information about her life. If I write about it today, it is because we ought never to lose sight of those who suffered so that we might live in peace.

Agnes was born in Birr, Co. Offaly, in 1909. In time, she became a nun and travelled to live in either France or Belgium. Towards the end of World War II, she ended up in the Ravensbrück concentration camp in northern Germany. Ravensbrück was opened in 1939 on the orders of Heinrich Himmler, and was intended as a camp for female prisoners.

From 1939-1945, 130,000 women prisoners passed through the camp. Only 15,000 of those survived until the camp was finally liberated by the Red Army. As if to revel in their diabolical cruelty, the Nazis opened a small male prison adjacent to the main camp. The male inmates were charged with managing the gas chambers. Agnes was one of only four Irish women to end up at Ravensbrück. Her family do not know why she was condemned to such a terrible fate.

However, a fellow inmate, Mary Cummins, was sent to the camp for being involved in the Belgian resistance, a cause with which Agnes may also have been involved.

What we do know is that, as the Red Army advanced on the camp in early 1945, the Nazis panicked and sought to gas the remaining prisoners in haste. Realising that their time was up, and not wishing to leave behind any living witnesses, they then decided to evacuate Ravensbrück. 24,500 women were forced on a 'death march'. Bizarrely, the SS handed over 500 prisoners to the Swedish and Danish Red Cross.

When the Russians entered the camp on April 30, 1945, they discovered just over 3,000 of the living dead. Soon after, they emancipated what was left of those on the death march. Like all the camps, Ravensbrück was a place of horror, a factory where human beings were consumed by flames of hatred.

Agnes Flanagan spent a year at least in those subhuman conditions. She was, however, one of the 500 to be handed over to Swedish officials at the time of evacuation. Swedish war records show that she arrived in Sweden on April 26, 1945.

One year later, she wrote from Belgium to her stepsister who was living in England. It was Easter, and with these words Agnes conveyed as much of her story as she wished the world to know: 'It is a dreadful time for me this Holy Week... On that Thursday last year, I was destined for the gas chamber on Good Friday morning, a most beautiful day for a death like that, just as Our Lord died for us on

that day. Sometimes I feel sorry for escaping from their hands. However, God wished it so as I had some other work to fulfil here below, many a soul to save and many a suffering person to console. A kind word is worth a fortune these days.'

Destined to die on Good Friday, destined to walk to her own Calvary, Agnes was spared the final degradation the Nazis reserved for their victims. 'A kind word is worth a fortune these days'. Having been stripped of everything, a kind word symbolised safety, security and sanity.

Looking at the copy of Agnes's letter which Kay Reynolds kindly sent me, I was struck by her beautiful handwriting. I was amazed that, within a year of having endured the pain and torment of such hell, she could write so sincerely, so calmly and so kindly. Here was an Irishwoman – a Catholic nun – destined to die at the merciless hands of Hitler's evil agents. And yet, here she is speaking of consoling those who suffer and of saving souls. Here she is teaching us the virtue of kindness. Here she is bearing witness to faith, hope and love.

The German philosopher Theodor Adorno said there could be no more poetry after Auschwitz. People like Agnes Flanagan were proof that Adorno was mistaken.

She emerged from the darkest depths with her spirit wounded but still intact. She witnessed industrial-scale slaughter, and yet the few remaining fragments of her life read like poetry of the heart.

To respond to such cruelty by speaking about the beauty of kindness, was an act of heroic gentleness. It was like a healing light emerging from the smoke. Agnes responded to the demonic rhetoric of hate with the poetry of love.

THE truth is that the only way to answer atrocities like Auschwitz or Ravensbrück is with poetry. How else but in tender verses of heartfelt emotion can you capture such suffering, such pain, such lack of human compassion? How else but in that sweet melody of the soul can you gaze upon the effects of evil and sing a new song?

As Agnes was condemned to Ravensbrück concentration camp, she held two rose petals in the palm of her hand. They were from the Garden of Gethsemane, that beautiful place where Christ was betrayed by a kiss on the eve of His execution.

Agnes believed those precious petals saved her life. She too was led away to die on Good Friday, but she survived and the petals became symbols of her deliverance and hope. Amid the pain and death of Ravensbrück, a delicate rose sustained the faith of one gentle soul. Agnes Flanagan brought Gethsemane to the Golgotha of Hitler's gas chambers. The Third Reich is no more. The rose petals still exist.

—mark.dooley@daily@mail.ie—

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