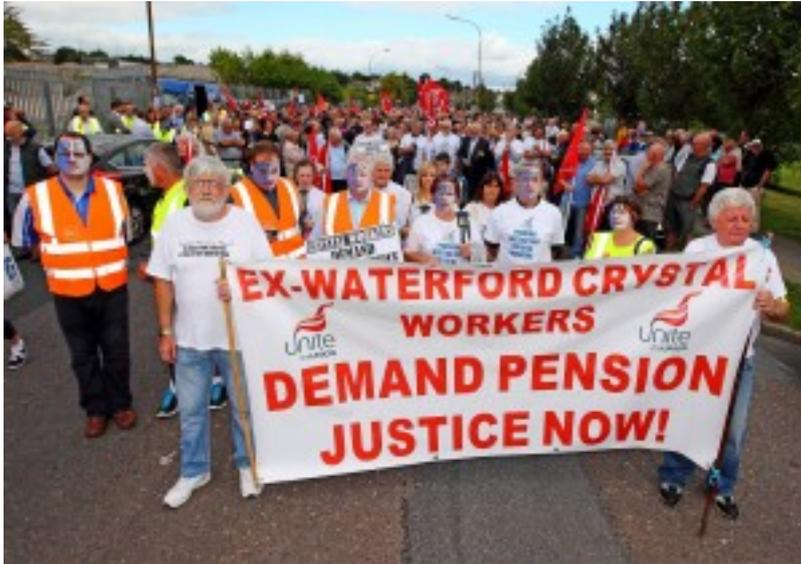


Crystal pension progress



The long wait for financial justice appears almost over for Waterford Crystal pensioners. | Photo: Noel Browne

Following weeks of talks at the Labour Relations Commission (LRC), up to 1,700 former Waterford Crystal workers are optimistic about receiving a partial, lump sum payment on their pension before Christmas, amounting to approximately €1,000 per year of service.

If confirmed, this would represent a massive cash injection in the region of €50 million into the city's economy, should agreement be reached with Revenue officials that the payout is made tax-free.

A significant breakthrough in the LRC talks came last Thursday, when it was agreed that the lump sum – payable as part of the pension protection settlement won in the European Court of Justice last year – would not affect the recipients' social welfare entitlements.

Approximately 650 workers who attended a meeting at Dooley's Hotel last Thursday night for an update on the negotiations from UNITE officials with a view to securing a final settlement, which could be reached in a matter of weeks.

In the meantime, there is to be an intense focus on trying to get the partial lump sum released prior to Christmas.

The proposed figure of about €1,000 per year of service will form part of the overall pension settlement and applies to all UNITE members, regardless of what pay scale they were on when the factory closed in 2009. This will be especially beneficial to the factory's former non-craft workers and was negotiated in the interests of equity amongst all Glass workers – and in recognition of the financial suffering inflicted on them since both the company and their pension became insolvent back in 2009.

The settlement talks will affect approximately 1,700 workers, who were on the pension register when the factory closed on 3rd January 2009. Most of those are currently members of UNITE and it is important to note that the LRC settlement will only benefit members of the trade union. There's a possibility that non-unionised workers could be forced to take a separate legal action of their own, if they were not on the pension register.

Sources say the mood at Thursday night's meeting was one of overwhelming relief, with the vast majority of workers satisfied with the information presented. Special mention was given to the fact that the terms proposed will also include 34 deceased members of the pension. Tribute was also paid to retired UNITE official Walter Cullen, who is unwell at the moment. Cullen came out of retirement to take part in the LRC process and is said to have been pivotal in the current offer being reached. Sean Maher deputised for Cullen at the LRC last week. Jimmy Kelly and his team were highly congratulated at the meeting, receiving a standing ovation for their commitment and dedication to the case.

Talks at the LRC are now entering the final stage and negotiations with the departments of Social Protection and Public Expenditure and Reform, as well as Revenue officials, said to be at a 'delicate stage'. Foremost in the talks will be securing an undertaking that the partial lump sum payment will be free from taxation. A final settlement on the overall pension package has yet to be reached, though LRC Chairman Kieran Mulvey is understood to be engaged in ongoing detailed discussions with the relevant Government departments.

It's thought that, should the LRC talks not conclude with an acceptable settlement, the workers could be again facing a significant delay. In that instance, there are two possibilities: that the case returns to the European courts for quantum assessments; or that UNITE proceeds with its High Court date of 13th January 2015. The latter process would not address issues of social welfare or taxation.

The fight for pension justice for the Waterford Crystal workers is now in its sixth year, having commenced in March 2009, weeks after the company and pension scheme were declared insolvent.