

‘How can anyone plan a future working like this?’



Dunnes Stores workers Fran Moloney and Taiga Mileze on the picket line in City Square on Thursday last. | Photo: Noel Browne

Dunnes Stores staff protest over working hours

Approximately 160 Dunnes Stores workers in Waterford and Dungarvan took to the streets on Holy Thursday for a one-day national work stoppage in protest over working hours and earnings security and the right to trade union representation.

Dunnes Stores in City Square and Michael Street in the city and at Bridge Street in Dungarvan remained open for business throughout the day, with management manning the tills and a small but notable number of shoppers passing the pickets to shop in the stores.

Workers on the local picket lines said they were frustrated and angered over the huge variation between their hours on a week-by-week basis, with the result that they couldn't rely on their wages to apply for a car loan, a mortgage or even pay rent and utility bills.

“Our contracts are for 15 hours per week and after that you never know what you will be working”, explained Niamh Lodge.

“You could go from 17 hours one week to 30 hours the next and back to 20 the week after. Sometimes those hours are spread over five days, which means you're not entitled to Social Welfare payments either.”

Kelly Flanagan said she's worked for Dunnes Stores for 10 years and has seen no improvement in the situation in all that time.

“Lots of the girls are still living at home with their parents because they can't rely on their wages to move out,” she said. “There's also a big problem for people with children, trying to plan childcare from one week to the next.”

One City Square worker, who asked not to be named, said management's decision not to support the strike would undoubtedly cause further tensions amongst the workforce: "The relationship between management and staff has been alright so far but there will be bitterness that they went against us today."

Dunnes Stores has not commented publicly on the strike. However, in a letter sent to staff in February, it warned of possible layoffs and redundancies if "harm" was inflicted on the company as a result of industrial action.

Speaking from the picket line in City Square, Independent TD Deputy John Halligan called on Dunnes Stores to engage with Mandate. "All workers in this country should have equal rights to collective bargaining," he said. "The manner in which Dunnes Stores is treating its staff is despicable."

Waterford Congress of Trade Union staged their own one-hour lunchtime solidarity demonstration with the picketers while People Before Profit also saluted the Dunnes workers for making a stand. "All the historical experience shows that if workers are prepared to fight for their rights they can win improvements in wages and conditions and maintain same, especially where their employers are hugely profitable," a spokesperson said. "The solidarity shown by local shoppers in terms of respecting the Dunnes workers pickets was truly amazing."

Trade union Mandate, which represents the majority of Dunnes Stores workers, declared the strike a 'massive success' as it resulted in a pledge from the Minister for Business and Employment Ged Nash that he would enact collective bargaining legislation by mid-2015.

This legislation, according to local spokesperson Bill Kelly, could have prevented Thursday's strike as it would specifically be enforced through the Circuit Court where employers such as Dunnes Stores refuse to engage in collective bargaining with workers through their unions.

"Our members in Dunnes Stores, who are mostly low paid and in very precarious employment, were forced to sacrifice a day's pay and stand outside in the cold and rain in order to simply have their voices heard," said Mr Kelly. "They want a living wage, secure hours and decent contracts of employment."