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# Health service facing summer unrest

Warning of 'exceptionally busy' hospitals and ambulance strikes

Niamh Griffin, Elaine Loughlin, and Rachel Lysaght

The health service is stumbling into a summer of discontent with more paramedic strikes planned for this month, on top of "exceptionally busy" hospitals and stretched community services.

Yesterday, around 2,000 paramedics and emergency staff picketed, including hundreds in Cork, under Siptu and Unite as they called for extra work and responsibilities to be recognised, among other pay-related issues.

Ambulance workers on picket lines across the country said they are "prepared for the long haul" if no action is seen on pay. It followed a rejection by members of proposed HSE pay improvements as inadequate, following Workplace Relations Committee engagement last year.

The strike left hospitals and other facilities running with 43% the normal ambulance staffing numbers.

Siptu ambulance sector organiser John McCamley called on the HSE to act on the recommendations of an independent review of roles and responsibilities from 2020.

He warned: "Next week we've a 48-hour stoppage and then the week after that a three-day stoppage, and then rolling strikes after that."

"It isn't necessary that we have these disputes. There's a very simple answer to this. We just need the HSE to drop their pre-conditions [to talks] and deal with a two-step solution to this."

Cork city-based paramedic Colin O'Leary said: "Our fight and our argument is that we are seeking recognition for the changes and modernisation that we have carried out over the last 15 years."

The HSE said that, by yesterday evening, it was seeing "significant impact" due to the action, including ambulances taking longer than usual to answer call-outs.

"We continue to prioritise patients facing emergencies such as cardiac or respiratory arrest, and those experiencing serious trauma such as that arising from road traffic accidents," said

a spokeswoman. However, the HSE acknowledged the union's contingency arrangements, while Mr McCamley said workers had left the picket lines at times to work.

Taoiseach Micheál Martin said a package was agreed and recommended by representative bodies and told the Dáil that the HSE remains willing to engage with unions.

Responding to Social Democrats leader Holly Cairns, he ruled out any direct involvement from the health minister.

"We've long gone from the day when there's a ministerial intervention in every single dispute," he said, adding disputes must be resolved through the Workplace Relations Commission.

Sinn Féin leader Mary Lou McDonald accused the Government of refusing to "resolve long-standing pay conditions and staffing issues". "Ambulance workers don't want to be on strike," she said.

"They want to be at work, helping people, saving lives, but you force them to fight for respect, for recognition and for fair pay, and it is to their credit that they will continue to respond to life-threatening situations during this stoppage."

Also this month, the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation (INMO), as well as the HSE, recorded high numbers of patients waiting for hospital beds.

Tuesday's HSE data showed 432 people on trolleys and 597 on temporary surge beds. The latter means those beds are not available for everyday care.

At University Hospital Limerick, where the INMO recorded 101 people on trolleys, a spokesman said: "Elective activity continues on a very limited basis."

No beds were blocked for infection control reasons, he said.

Some 337 patients presented to the emergency department in the 24-hour period leading up to 8am on Tuesday, compared to an average of 260 last year, he added.

The HSE spokeswoman said: "Hospitals are exceptionally busy at present."

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SMOOTH OPERATOR: Irish-Ethiopian actor and producer Ruth Negga at a photocall of the members of the jury at the 79th edition of the Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, southern France, yesterday. Picture: Sameer Al-Doumy/AFP/Getty

## Driver who killed cyclist had cocktail of drugs in system

Gordon Deegan

A drunk Clare driver who killed a cyclist while driving with her two children in the car and an open bottle of wine in the passenger seat has been sent to jail for four and a half years.

Ennis Circuit Court heard Saoirse Lillis McMahon, 33, had a cocktail of drugs in her system and was 50% over the legal drink-drive limit when she crashed into Michael Lorigan, aged 70, on August 16, 2023 on the N67 at Baunmore, Kilkee.

Imposing sentence, Judge Francis Comerford said Ms Lillis McMahon was driving the car "when she was completely unfit to drive and posed a real danger to anyone that she came across".

The judge said the woman posed "a very real danger" to her two boys, aged six and nine at the time, who were passengers in the car, due to the intoxicants that she had taken.

Mr Lorigan was coming towards the end of an 88km

cycle and was just 8km away from meeting his wife, Dympna, in Kilkee where the two planned to celebrate their 39th wedding anniversary.

In one of a number of heart-rendering victim impact statements read out in court, Dympna said she passed Michael out in her car at 12.15pm on the day on her way to Kilkee and she commented: "That was the last time I saw him alive".

Ten minutes later, local



Saoirse Lillis McMahon: Unfit to drive and posed a real danger.

Gardai received a call from a motorist of a car driving erratically on the N67 and dispatched a car to the area.

However, before officers arrived, the same motorist phoned gardai again to say she had just witnessed that same blue Vauxhall Astra car crash into a cyclist.

Officers established that Lillis McMahon was driving at a speed of between 81kmph and 99kmph before impact and did not brake before impact.

In her victim impact statement, Dympna said: "No words can describe the emotions I felt on that fateful day in August 2023 when the world I knew came crashing down. Distress, disbelief, shock, anguish, extreme grief, intense sadness are just a few."

"Michael and I faced many challenges and got through them by leaning on each other's strengths. Now I'm faced with my biggest challenge yet and I don't have him with me to share the burden."

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## Luas bridge would 'sterilise' Cork's maritime culture

Emer Walsh

Cork City's quays will be permanently blocked from letting ships dock if a fixed bridge is put across the River Lee for the proposed Cork Luas project.

That is according to the former commercial manager of the Port of Cork, Michael McCarthy, who said the current plans for the Luas network will "sterilise" Cork City's maritime culture.

"While our forefathers had

the solution 200 years ago, the current planners seem to want to ignore their experience of growing a city around the port," said Mr McCarthy.

"Under the current proposal, ships will never again be seen in our maritime city, no foreign naval vessels, no cruise vessels, tall ships, no ferries or water taxis, visiting yachts and power boats."

Mr McCarthy's comments

follow concerns raised by minister of state at the Department of Transport, Jerry Buttimer, who said that he is "not happy" with the proposed Cork Luas route, which is set to pass through two sports clubs in his constituency.

The fourth and final public briefing on the proposed plans is due to take place at The Metropole Hotel on Wednesday from 12pm.

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## Inappropriate texts to girl, 16

A chef at a Cork takeaway who was fired after sending texts of a sexual nature to an underage girl has lost his unfair dismissal claim.

The operator of Mizzoni's Pizza said that the chef had a pattern of speaking inappropriately to customers, particularly young females, which culminated in contacting a 16-year-old girl on social media.

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## Ahern 'worried about Africans, next generation of Muslims'

Louise Burne  
Political Correspondent

Former taoiseach Bertie Ahern has suggested that there are "too many" immigrants and that Ireland "can't be taking in people from the Congo".

A video, which appeared to be taken during a by-election canvass in Dublin Central, was shared on social media following a conversation between the former Fianna Fáil leader and a woman at a doorstep.

The video was filmed without Mr Ahern's knowledge.

Fianna Fáil's by-election candidate, John Stephens, is an ally of the former taoiseach and is contesting the election in Mr Ahern's former constituency, Dublin Central. The by-election will be held on May 22 to fill the seat vacated by former Fine Gael minister Paschal Donohoe following his departure to the World Bank in November.

The video shows a canvasser calling Mr Ahern over to a doorstep to speak to a woman who "wants to say hello".

She raised concerns about "globalism" and "hordes of foreigners coming into our country".

"Can we not close our borders?" she asked.

"Can we not be like Poland, and have safe, clean streets?"

"All these people coming in. The Indians, that have a space programme, all these Muslims have 47 countries. All these Africans that have a massive continent and massive natural resources."

When the woman said to Mr Ahern that the people coming in "don't give a shit about Ireland", he responded: "No."

"I think there are too many coming in," Mr Ahern continued. "I think we have to take some in. I have no problems with the Ukrainians. In fairness, Russia moved in, and [there is] war in their country."

"But a lot of the Ukrainians are going back now. We still have a lot of Poles here."

"But the ones I worry about are the Africans. I agree with you on the Africans. We can't be taking in people from the Congo and all these places. I think there's too many from those places."

When asked about Muslim people, Mr Ahern said he does not "worry about this generation", but he does worry about the "next generation and the kids growing up".

"That's when I think the problem will be. I said this to [justice minister] Jim O'Callaghan. That's where the problem comes," Mr Ahern said.

The woman went on to tell Mr Ahern that she was also concerned about transgender issues and hate speech laws.

She then told him that she had been recording him and was going to post it on social media, because she believed it was "important that you've said that you disagree with Jim O'Callaghan".

Mr Ahern denied that he had disagreed with Mr O'Callaghan, as the woman accused him of "not sticking up for the Irish".

The woman then called Mr Ahern a "liar" as he walked away from the door.

A spokesperson for Mr Ahern told the *Irish Examiner* that "Bertie wasn't aware he was being recorded until the end of the conversation".

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