

DECENCY FOR DUNNES WORKERS

Dunnes Stores to be hit in workers' rights crackdown

- New law means workers will be legally entitled to new agreements
- Majority of Dunnes Stores' 10,000 staff are on 15-hour deals

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Dunnes Stores, the Irish retail giant headed by Margaret Heffernan, is set to be hit by the government for its use of low-hour contracts for thousands of its staff.

The government is bringing forward legislation to tackle the issue of insecure working hours for staff, with high level political sources saying that the new laws are being driven to deal with the employment

environment at firms such as Dunnes Stores.

The move will put government on a collision course with Dunnes, one of the country's largest employers.

Trade union **Mandate** said that the new laws could impact the majority of Dunnes Stores 10,000 workers across its 112 outlets.

The move comes days before Dunnes is due before the Labour Court in its long-running dispute with workers over pay and hours.

Dunnes Stores workers have protested that their hours and wages can be cut at the whim

of their managers and that it makes it more difficult to get a mortgage.

Under the new proposed law, workers will be legally entitled to new contracts which reflect more closely the actual hours they are working.

The government is bringing forward legislation to tackle the practice of workers being left on 15-hour contracts, even though they are actually regularly working up to 30 hours per week.

Minister of State for Small Business Pat Breen said he believed that the proposed law was 'balanced' between the rights of workers and employers.

"We need to look after the employment rights of low paid workers who are being abused in that area but at the same time to protect employers who are providing jobs as well," he said.

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Two years ago, Taoiseach Enda Kenny told Dunnes workers striking over low-hours contracts that he supported their right to have clarity about their working lives.

Under the new law, workers

will have their average hours calculated by looking back at the past 18 months. They will then be entitled to a new

contract in one of four bands: 1-10 hours, 11-24 hours, 25-34 hours, and 35-plus hours. For example, a worker on a 15-hour contract who turns out to be doing an average of 35 hours a week would get a new contract for 35-plus hours work.

The new law will also require employers to give certain basic information to new workers within five days, such as the rate of pay and the length of the working week. If they do not comply, then labour inspectors will issue a warning to comply within one month.

If they still do not comply, they can be prosecuted in court and fined.

There has been criticism of the proposed law from em-

ployers group Ibec for being crude and disproportionate.

But Breen said it was aimed at addressing the increasing casualisation of the workforce. He said there would be exemptions for employ-

ers who could not afford to give longer-hour contracts to their staff.

"There are reasonable defences for employers. We didn't want to put any onerous burdens on them," he said.

Since last year's general election, two private members bills to deal with low-hours contracts have been drafted by both Labour and Sinn Féin. Now the government is hoping that it can get the support of Fianna Fáil to pass its own version.

Fianna Fáil jobs spokesman Niall Collins said that his party would back whichever bill got the balance right.

"We're committed to dealing with the issue. It was in our party manifesto," he said.

Mandate trade union campaign officer Dave Gibney expressed frustration that nothing had changed since Dunnes Stores workers went on strike over low-hours contracts two years ago. He also said the union was concerned that the banded hour provisions in the government's proposed law were too loose.

"We're happy it's being acknowledged there is a problem. However, the solution has so many gaping holes, it will require significant amendments," he said.