

Running to stand still? Two decades of trade union activity in the Irish long-term care sector

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ETUI Webinar

September 29th, 2021



UNIVERSITY OF
LIMERICK
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**Protecting and
improving the
working
conditions of
care workers**

SIPTU and Fórsa

**Review of two
major union
campaigns over the
past two decades**

**Analysis of key
priorities emerging
for unions during
the pandemic**

Challenges

Population ageing and availability of formal long-term care

Restructuring of health and social care services (Health Service Executive HSE outsourcing & application of private sector management principles)

Regulation

Employment Conditions

Low formalisation of
employment
arrangements

Low pay

Low, fragmented and
unsociable working
hours



Campaigns

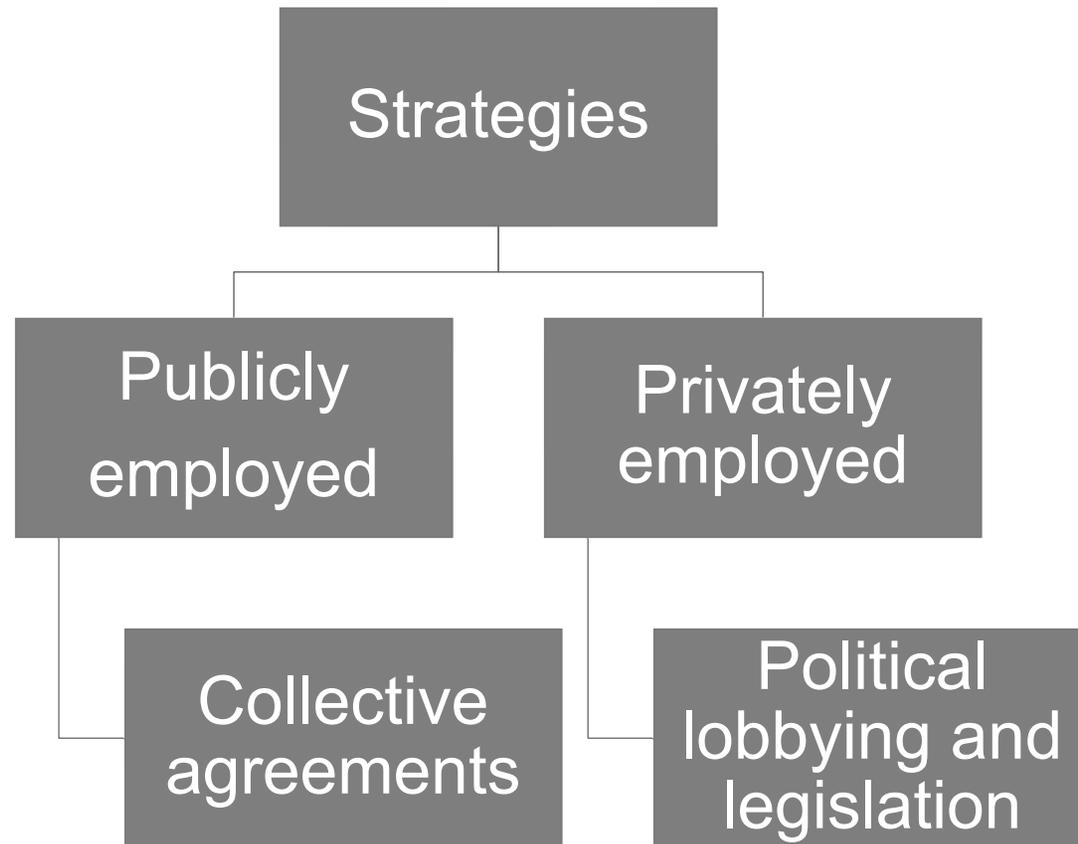


A long-running union campaign centred on working hours insecurity



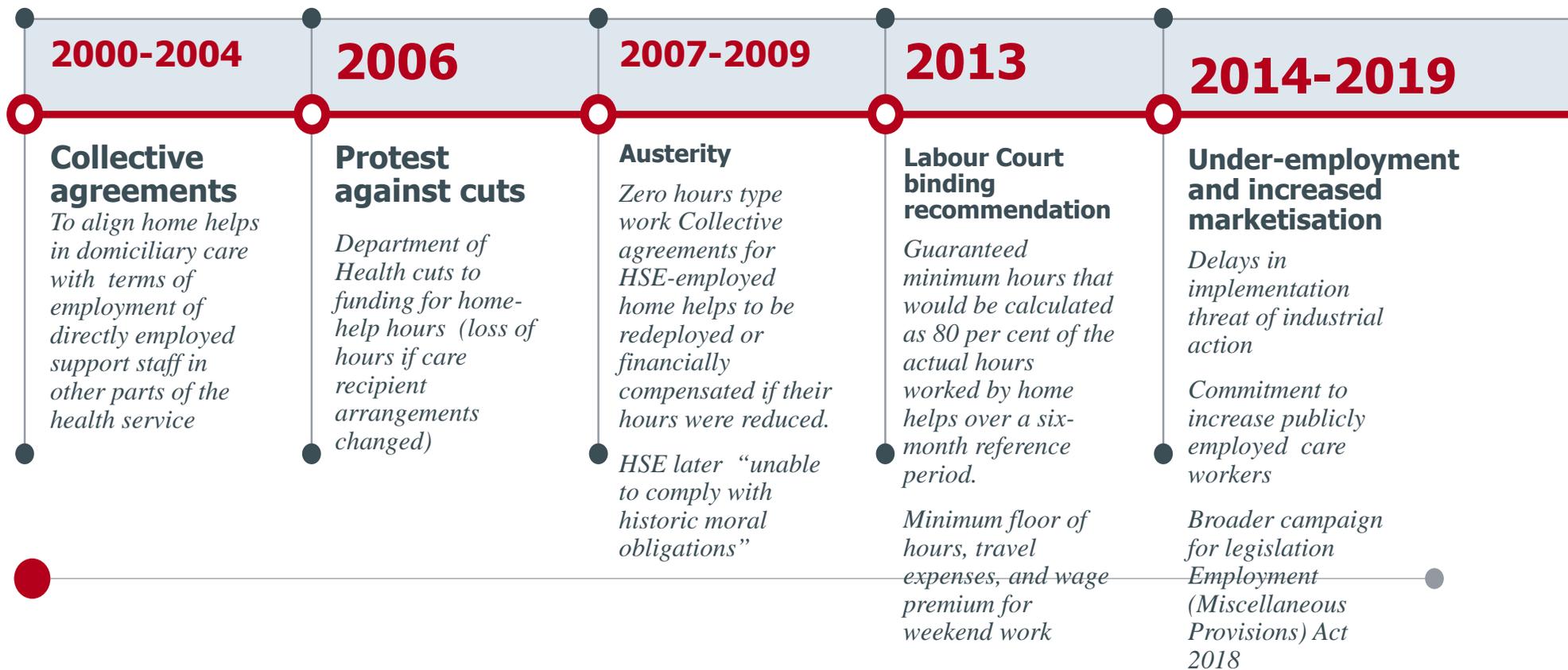
Pay restoration in the nonprofit sector

Alternating Strategies



Campaign 1

Working time security

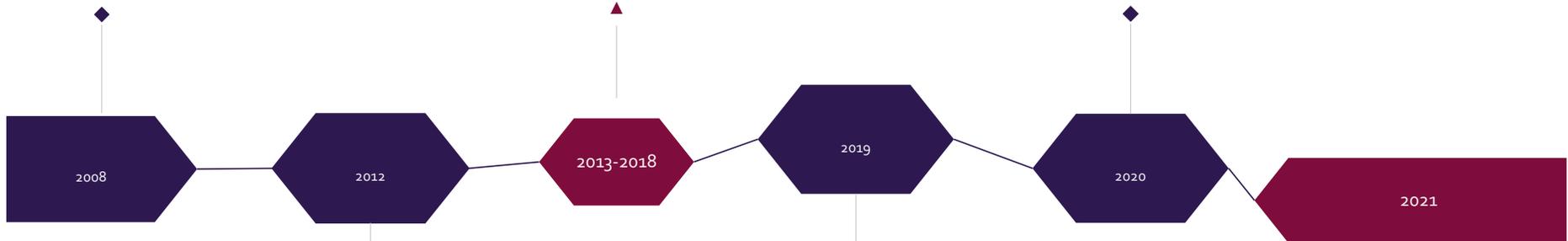


Campaign 2: Pay Justice

Financial Crisis, austerity budgets and cuts to Section 39 organizations (non profits primarily in community care provision). Section 39 employees' terms (pay and hours)

Pay cuts to public sector workers reversed but no restoration in Section 39 organisations

A one-day strike was held in a small number of agencies in February 2020
General election & slow government formation
Onset of Covid19 pandemic



Introduction of competitive tendering process

A 2018 Workplace Relations Commission brokered agreement between unions, HSE and Department of Health for pay restoration over three years (initially in 50 of the larger Section 39 agencies that accounted for half of HSE funding) had still not been implemented

In late 2020, SIPTU and Forsa reignited the campaign, agreement reached for two phases of pay restoration in 2021 to restore the pay of 7000 workers and a commitment to negotiations on remaining payments

*Trade union
priorities during
the COVID-19
pandemic*

- Health and safety of staff
- Adequate staffing levels and working conditions in non-public health settings
- Lack of child-care services for health-care workers



Campaign Lessons

- Incremental improvements in pay, travel time and minimum working hours are valuable, particularly in relation in a sector where working hours as well as pay rates is important in achieving decent income levels
- Dedicated organising teams maintaining momentum and leadership among workforce over extended period of time
- Spill over effects between practices in public and non profit sector
- Strategies for private sector employees requires broader political action, aligning with civil society organisations and union activity in other sectors to address areas of overlap
- Lobbying for legislation/regulation which extends protection to non-unionised workers

Future directions

- Greater alignment of employment practices between public, private and voluntary sector service providers is necessary in the health and social care sector (Kessler et al, 2020). In Ireland, a strategy to move Section 39 workers to the same terms as Section 38 employees could prove fruitful in delivering long-term improvements.
- Increase public understanding of how the sector is financed and profit generated within it. Private providers point to a lack of funding as a constraint to working conditions, however these arguments have identified as part of a trade narrative that suits the interests of large providers and oversimplifies the issues of funding and profit in the system (Burns et al., 2016).
- Increase transparency in the system. Lolic and Timonen (2020) cite the lack of transparency when it comes to the allocation of care, illustrating the importance of having others that can advocate for older or vulnerable persons. Employment conditions affect workers ability to advocate for clients. This represents a tangible issue on which unions can campaign for improved transparency in the sector for the benefit of both carers and clients.
- Spasova et al. (2018) contend that the attractiveness of the sector to workers remains low, lobbying of government for changes that enhance the status of care workers is imperative to securing a high functioning care sector in the future.



Conclusion

- A coordinated European response to the care sector: trade union, carer and patient representative bodies jointly lobbying for a European directive on care provision, rooted in higher staffing ratios and enhanced regulation, is one possible route to securing positive long-term changes.
- Impact of telecare and remote monitoring technology on care workers. Potential to alter the skill mix required in the sector, but technology and professionalisation arguments need to be linked. Risk of work intensification, increased control, altered terms of employment and fundamental change to the nature of the work.

Thank you



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