

Annisette: 10% offer is only the start



National Trade Union Centre general secretary, Michael Annisette

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As ongoing public sector wage talks remain clouded in uncertainty, general secretary of the National Trade Union Centre (NATUC) Michael Annisette has emphasised that the Government's ten per cent salary increase offer to public service employees is merely a "starting point" in the bargaining process—not a final deal that guarantees immediate relief for public servants.

Further, regarding the highly anticipated question of payment for public servants before Christmas, Annisette was non-committal, explaining that a blanket "yes or no" is impossible.

Speaking on CNC3's Morning Brew programme yesterday, Annisette sought to dispel the notion that the ten per cent offer—made by the government in its budget presentation to replace the four per cent proposal—was a done deal.

While he noted that unions, including the Public Services Association (PSA) and the National Union of Government and Federated Workers (NUGFW), accepted the "concept" of the ten per cent, he underscored that the process must adhere to the principles of industrial relations. This requires a full negotiating process to be finalised, ratified and signed off on before becoming a legitimate agreement.

"I want to remind the general public, the position was a ten per cent offer, a starting offer in the context of the outstanding negotiations. And let me put in the public domain, too, that there are more than three collective bargaining periods that are outstanding. So that when we talk about negotiations, we are talking about for a 12-year period in some instances where workers, and in particularly Government employees, its statutory boards did not get any wage increase," he said.

The ultimate goal, he stated, is to secure a final percentage that accounts for the severe loss of purchasing power accumulated over that decade-plus period.

To expedite this, the NATUC general secretary issued a public plea for the Chief Personnel Officer (CPO) to "meet and treat as quickly as possible" with all outstanding unions representing delegated workers.

On the issue of possible payment by Christmas, Annisette cited the complex internal administrative steps required for back pay, including detailed accounting principles and adjustments, which inherently take time.

"We would like to see if it is financially possible, and if the process lends itself for that payment, because there's a process to make backpay. Everybody knows that. You have to do the accounting principles. You have to go back into the times. You have to do the adjustments. That takes some time," he stressed.

However, he suggested that a solution might involve a negotiated arrangement, such as receiving "part thereof, or a percentage of the amount" to provide immediate relief to workers.

"One would have anticipated that if the past government would have offered four per cent, that some process would have been put in place to meet the payment so we are just talking about a six percentage point difference.

"And as I always say, there are ways and means of solving a negotiating problem. It doesn't necessarily mean, and I'm speaking from a natural perspective, that you will get all your money from Christmas. There can be, for example, an arrangement where you get part thereof, or a per cent of the amount to satisfy the workers and their needs," Annisette explained.

He also pushed back against external speculation on funding, dismissing ideas from economists about a second budget or drawing from the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, maintaining that the method for securing and distributing the money—the "collateral"—

would be determined by the “parties to the collective bargaining process” at the table.

“I’m saying that there are many different mechanisms that can be put on the table in order to address the issue of outstanding wages, increases that have been owed to government employees. There are several different mechanisms. So let the process go through. Let us discuss the process around the table rather than having the speculative,” Annisette added.

He argued that the entire economy would ultimately benefit from the injection of cash through back pay, challenging any economist to deny the fundamental fact that “economics is about people” and that workers are the drivers of consumption and productivity.