

NORTHERN IRELAND CERTIFICATION OFFICE

HEARINGS BY THE CERTIFICATION OFFICER UNDER THE TRADE UNION AND LABOUR RELATIONS (NI) ORDER 1995 (AS AMENDED)

HEARINGS: GUIDANCE ON PROCEDURE

Introduction

1. The Certification Officer holds hearings to determine complaints made by trade union members against their union. A complaint may be that the union has breached one or more of certain statutory provisions (e.g. regarding elections), or that it has breached, or threatens to breach, its own rules on certain matters (e.g. disciplinary proceedings). The member making the complaint is “the applicant”, and the union is “the respondent”. Collectively, they are “the parties”.
2. The Certification Officer seeks to conduct hearings in a manner which avoids excessive formality while enabling the business to be dealt with fairly, clearly and expeditiously.
3. The issues to be determined by the Certification Officer will have been identified in correspondence with the parties before the hearing. If there is any dispute about whether the issues have been correctly identified, this must be raised at the start of the hearing. It is essential that there is no misunderstanding at the hearing about the nature of the allegations that are being made (ie exactly which statutory provisions and/or union rules are alleged to have been breached) and the grounds on which they are being made.
4. Hearings, which are open to the public, are normally held in the building housing the Certification Office, at 2 -12 Gordon Street, Belfast BT1 2LG. Separate consulting rooms are available to the parties throughout the hearing.
5. Hearings are recorded. This is to assist the Certification Officer in the preparation of his decision. No transcript is made and the recording is not available to the parties.

Documents/The Bundle

6. The Certification Office will prepare a bundle of documents for use at the hearing. This will consist of relevant documentation already submitted by both parties. Each page of the bundle will be numbered in the bottom right hand corner. **At the hearing, this number should be used to identify any document that is referred to.** The office will send the bundle to the parties at least one week before the hearing is due to begin.
7. The Certification Officer will set the date (“the specified date”) by which documents for inclusion in the bundle must be submitted to him. Any document not submitted in time may be excluded from the hearing.
8. If a party wishes to introduce a document that has not been submitted by the specified date, it must apply in writing to the Certification Officer for permission. It should do this as soon as possible after the specified date. The application should include three copies of the document and explain why it was not submitted before the specified date. A copy of the document and of the application must be sent to the other party at the same time as they are sent to the Certification Officer.
9. If a party wishes to introduce a new document at the hearing itself, it must apply orally to the Certification Officer at the start of the hearing. It must bring three copies of the document and explain to the Certification Officer why it did not submit the document in accordance with paragraphs 7 or 8 above.
10. The Certification Officer has no power to order the production of any document by either party.

Skeleton Arguments

11. Although it is not required, parties are encouraged to produce an outline summary of their case (a skeleton argument) for circulation before the hearing. This often makes for a more focused consideration of the issues. The Certification Office will send a copy of each party’s skeleton argument to the other party. If only one party submits a skeleton argument, it will not be passed to the other party until the day of the hearing.

Witnesses

12. Both parties may call witnesses, whose names must be notified to the Certification Officer in advance. The Certification Officer has no power to order the attendance of any witness. One party’s witnesses may be questioned by the other party.

13. Each party is encouraged to produce written witness statements and exchange these with the other party before the hearing (with a copy also to the Certification Officer). More weight will be given to a written witness statement if the witness attends the hearing to be questioned on it.

14. On travel and other expenses for witnesses, see paragraph 19 below.

Procedure at the Hearing

15. The procedure will normally be as follows:

(a) The Certification Officer will confirm the issues to be determined and will set out the basic facts as he understands them, in an effort to focus the hearing as clearly as possible.

(b) The applicant (i.e. the trade union member) or his/her representative will be invited to present his/her case and to call any witnesses. This is not an opportunity for general criticism of the union. Argument must be focused on the issues that are to be determined, and the evidence given by witnesses must be relevant to those issues.

The union's representative will be given the opportunity to question the applicant and his/her witnesses.

(c) The union's representative will be invited to make the union's response and to call any witnesses.

The applicant or his/her representative will be given the opportunity to question those giving evidence on the union's behalf.

Note: Where a party is legally represented at a hearing, the legal representative may not be questioned by the other side. Only those who have given evidence may be questioned by the other side.

(d) The union's representative will be invited to summarise its response to the application and, if appropriate, to make argument on the terms of any enforcement order that the applicant is seeking.

(e) The applicant or his/her representative will be invited to make a summarise his/her case. This should address the terms of any enforcement order that the applicant is seeking.

16. The Certification Officer may ask questions of any of the participants at any stage of the proceedings.

17. The Certification Officer has power at any stage of the proceedings to strike out the whole or part of an applicant's complaint or a union's response, or to order that the application or response be amended. The grounds on which he may do so are that the application or response, or any part of it: is scandalous (ie irrelevant and abusive of the other party); is vexatious (ie made without expectation of success but in order to harass the other party, or out of some improper motive); has no reasonable prospect of success; or is otherwise misconceived. An application or response may be struck out on the Certification Officer's own initiative or at the request of the applicant or the union.

Costs

18. The Certification Officer has no power to award costs.

Expenses

19. Expenses for reasonable travel costs and certain other costs incurred by the applicant and his/her necessary witnesses in a hearing may be reimbursed by the Certification Officer. The Certification Officer has discretion to allow or refuse all claims.

Special Needs

20. Parties should contact the Certification Office as soon as possible if they or anyone attending a hearing with them have a disability or a special need.

The Decision

21. The Certification Officer will issue his written decision, with full reasons, as soon as possible after the hearing. At the end of a hearing he will normally give an indication of when he expects the decision to be given.
22. If the Certification Officer considers that there has been a breach of a statutory provision or union rule he will make a declaration to that effect. He will also consider whether it is appropriate for him to make an enforcement order (see paragraph 15 (d) and (e) above).
23. The Certification Officer may, if he considers it appropriate, make observations arising from or connected with the hearing.

Right of Appeal

24. There is a right of appeal to the Court of Appeal on a point of law arising from the written decision of the Certification Officer or from the proceedings before him. There is no right of appeal on a matter of fact. Appeals are governed by Order 59 of the Rules of the Supreme Court (Northern Ireland) 1980 and are conducted by way of notice of appeal and rehearing. Appeals must be lodged with the Court of Appeal within 42 days from the date the written decision was sent.

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