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24th November public sector strike in Ireland

Andrew Flood

December 1, 2009

On the 24th of November something extraordinary happened in Ireland. Some 250,000 workers acted together in a day-long strike against the public sector wage cuts planned by the government. The vast majority of these workers had never gone on strike before, yet across almost all workplaces the strike involved 90% or more of those working.

This strike took place in the face of hysterical attacks on public sector workers, which included one business commentator suggesting that those going to strike were guilty of High Treason. Conviction for High Treason when Ireland was under the British empire used to involve the person being hung until they had passed out, then being revived so a hole could be cut in their belly and their entrails dragged out before an axeman would cut off their limbs one by one and then, finally, chop off their head. The Class War is clearly escalating from the point of view of the capitalist class!

There is much that can be criticised about the organisation of the strike; after twenty years of social partnership, almost no one in the unions knew how to organise a strike, from the

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national leadership to the rank and file. This often left those at the base feeling abandoned or trapped in nonsensical decisions. But that is not the interesting story of the day; the interesting story is that despite all the problems, in almost all cases, workers organised themselves at the branch and section level to build effectively for the strike and day-long picket.

The main outcome of the day was that 250,000 workers quite suddenly found themselves thrust into a common identification of workers standing in opposition to local management and the state. All this under a crazed ideological offensive from the capitalist class. Many, perhaps most, had been very apprehensive about going on strike. The actual experience of strike swept away many of those apprehensions and did more in one week to build a confidence and organisation at the base of the unions than had been done in the previous decade.

At the time of writing, between that strike and the potential second one on the 3rd December, it is not clear how the new found militancy will develop. There may be some crappy deal negotiated by ICTU which will defuse the situation until the next time when the government returns for another cut. But the employers are fighting a very aggressive class war, they may not be willing to allow any compromise. In this case, we may already be in the midst of an escalating wave of strikes.

Either way, we have seen a massive demonstration of the potential power of workers when we stand together as workers. That power has been almost invisible in Ireland for two decades but it clearly never went away. That demonstration is what we can build on to fight the crisis and fight for a new world in the months and years ahead.