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We all want early retirement

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Over a hundred years ago, when the American Federation of Labour issued its call for an eight-hour day (see Anarchist Origins of May Day in Workers Solidarity no.45), workers came together in large numbers to fight for the right to spend more time with their families. Now is the time for the trade union movement to raise the call for shorter working hours, longer holidays and earlier retirement – with of course no loss of pay.

Why should we all have to wait until we are too old to enjoy it before being allowed to retire? Why should we be expected to work at least 39 hours per week (plus overtime in many cases) in order to be able to survive? The achievement of early retirement and a shorter working week would have many benefits – reducing stress and pressures in the workplace, giving workers more time for leisure activities and creating work for those who are presently written off by the system.

Golden Handshakes

Politicians and business leaders have no difficulty funding huge salaries, “golden handshakes” and enhanced pensions for themselves. In 1994, five executives at Allied Irish Bank gave themselves an average wage increase of £162,500 per annum each. When Matt Russell – the legal officer in the Attorney General’s office who was responsible for the delay in responding to extradition warrants for child sex abuser Fr. Brendan Smyth – was forced to take early retirement earlier this year he was given a golden handshake of ££138,000. Government ministers can qualify for full pensions after only three years of service.

Teachers have nothing to apologise for in looking for early retirement. It is an issue which should be taken up by the trade union movement as a whole.

out of the water however by an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report “Education at a Glance” published in March of this year.

Working Conditions

This report (based on a survey carried out in 1992) showed that Irish teachers are faced by the largest classes in Europe. Of the countries surveyed, only Turkey with a Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR) of 29.3 exceeds the Irish ratio of 25.6. (The average PTR in EU countries was 18.5). Total teaching hours in Irish primary schools (951 per annum) was third highest in the survey, well above the EU average of 882. Finally, the survey showed that the Irish primary education system is grossly underfunded with average spending per pupil of only \$1,770 compared to the EU average of \$2,902.¹

The teachers’ claim for an early retirement scheme which would help ease some of the stresses caused by having to work in overcrowded and underfunded classrooms, and to deal with the social effects of poverty and unemployment is thus entirely justified. While the final outcome remains unclear, their action has had the effect of placing the issue of early retirement firmly on the agenda.

Crazy anomaly

It is one of the crazy anomalies in the capitalist system that huge numbers of people (approximately half a million on this small island) are placed under huge stress by being without a job or adequate income while others are stressed out through having to work harder and for longer hours. The average worker spends roughly 90,000 hours of his/her life at work — if he/she is “lucky” enough to have a job.

¹ All figures are taken from INTO magazine Tuarascail, April/May 1995 and refer to the 26-County State.

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On Tuesday May 23rd, approximately 15,000 teachers marched through Dublin as part of their campaign for early retirement. The June 1995 issue of Tuarascail (magazine of the Irish National Teachers Organisation – INTO) said that this was “...merely the initiation and not the culmination of a campaign. The outstanding issues must be addressed and resolved. They will not go away. Now is the time to deal with the issues.” Rather than pledging further strike action however (INTO members had voted by an 86% majority for limited industrial action), Tuarascail went on to say that the teacher unions “...are ready to re-open negotiations.”

By 13th July, the unions had called off any threat of further action following agreement with the Department of Education that talks on early retirement would resume in September. The union leaderships have agreed that no more than 300 teachers will be allowed to take early retirement annually and that the overall cost of the early retirement claim will be kept within the terms of the Programme for Competitiveness and Work (PCW). The government agreed to set up a commission to report on public service pensions, examining in particular voluntary early retirement. This commission is not expected to report until 1998.

Show of submission

Yet again the teachers’ union leaders – with the connivance of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) – have managed to turn a show of strength into meek submission.

Talks on the teachers’ claim have been going on since early 1994. It was launched amid a barrage of statistics from the Departments of Finance and Education which were designed to prove that the productivity of Irish teachers compared unfavourably with the educational systems of other EU countries and that – by extension – the claim could not be afforded. These statistics were blown