

More con trick than Concession

Vote NO! to the PCW

Alan MacSimóin

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TOP TRADE union leaders like Phil Flynn, Billy Attley and Peter Cassells have been working flat out to get the employers and government to agree another national deal for pay restraint. The talks were on, then they were off, then they were on again. It was all a game to make it look like the unions leaders were fighting hard for their members. And maybe they felt they had to put on more of an act this time. The Programme for Competitiveness and Work doesn't even pretend to offer much more than pay restraint and cheap labour schemes.

After the experience of the 1987–90 Programme for National Recovery (PNR) and the 1990–93 Programme for Economic and Social Progress (PESP) many trade unionists will wonder why on earth they want yet another agreement to keep down workers' wage increases while bosses' profits soar.

The PESP was supposed to be a trade-off of very low wage rises in return for job creation and help for the low paid. Workers and bosses were now "social partners" who would pull together to get the economy on its feet again. The job creation didn't happen. When the deal was signed there were 245,000 on the dole. There are now over 300,000. The real figure is higher still, as the government keep knocking further groups out of the official figures, such as over 55s, people on FAS schemes and school leavers.

The low paid are still low paid. Even in the allegedly "over paid" state sector poverty wages are a reality. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has reported that clerical assistants in the civil service earn just 50% of the average industrial wage. Some are so poorly paid that they qualify for the Family Income Supplement.

Only 54% of workers got anything under Clause 3, which allowed local bargaining for up to 3% extra, and most of these were in well organised jobs where the members didn't allow their bosses to ignore claims. Workers recognised as being so low-paid that they need the 'protection' of state Joint Labour Committees got nothing under this Clause as their bosses simply refused to negotiate. And these workers were especially hard hit by the 1% levy and the "Dirty Dozen" welfare cuts. Claiming the end of the 1% levy as a concession is rubbish. It should never have been in existence and the money stopped should be repaid.

In the six years up to 1992 the economy grew by 25%, top executives' pay by 54% and company profits by 70%. In the same period the unemployed saw their incomes rise by a mere 8% and those

at work by just 6% above inflation. Senior union officials whose wages are linked to Department Secretaries in the government saw their pay shoot up by 66.2% and those linked to Assistant Department Secretaries by 61.4%.

With three year deals which determined pay rises and bound us to a 'no strike' clause a lot of workers didn't see much point in going to union meetings. What's the point, they asked, in going to meetings if we can't lodge claims or take action. While union membership actually grew, life within the unions at grassroots level slowed down. This has happened to such a degree that many members only see their unions in terms of the General Secretary's appearances on TV or as some sort of agency you can get help from on personal matters like representation at the Unfair Dismissals Tribunal.

To many their union is a 'service' rather than a means by which they can get together to fight for more of the good things in life. Most union leaders argue that strikes are "old-fashioned" (and hard to win if you obey the provisions of the Industrial Relations Act, an Act which was brought in as part of the PNR), occupations are illegal, fighting to defend jobs is "unrealistic" and going for high wages rises is "impossible".

These union leaders looked at Britain and saw the unions being hammered by Thatcher's Tories. They took fright and decided the way to survive was to not antagonise the employers or government. Of course in adopting this position they were left with little to offer their members and ended up with unions that are weak, only it was done here by union leaders rather than government. After all, if you surrender before being attacked who is going to attack you!

This is the background to the acceptance of job losses and a five year pay freeze in Aer Lingus. "Social partnership" has meant big sacrifices from the workers while the axe-man Bernie Cahill was put up in Dublin's super-expensive Westbury Hotel at taxpayers expense. Now they propose to extend the concept of 'social partnership' right down to each individual workplace. If we are 'partners' with our bosses why on earth do we need unions? A simple question, but one that the bureaucrats running most of our unions can't or won't answer.

Of all the major commitments given in the deal only one has been honoured... pay restraint. So its no wonder that the bosses and government want another deal. The only dissent on their side comes from that section of the ruling class who feel that unions are so weakened that they can get away with even lower (or none) wage increases.

While the bosses won't be satisfied with anything less than a reduction in real wages, It would be amazing if they weren't happy with a PESP-type deal. They get what they want: small wage rises, a large pool of unemployed to increase competition for jobs and thus make workers feel insecure, industrial peace, and weakened trade unions. But why do the union leaders want more of the same?

You can only be surprised if you see it as a betrayal by "our own side". Their interests are different. Their pay and their lifestyle are different. Their status is different. And this gives them a different point of view. Many, though by no means all, may have started out as rank & file members, sometimes quite radical ones. However they are now more at home in the corridors of power than in the factory or office.

They do not see themselves as on our side in battles between workers and bosses. They see themselves as professional mediators and peacemakers between the two opposing classes. This is not to say that they will never support a fightback by their members, they sometimes will but they regard this as an unfortunate necessity. They would much rather try to stitch up a compromise agreement in the Labour Relations Commission.

They do not see their role as winning disputes but as “solving” or, even better, avoiding disputes. Sadly this attitude is not confined to the few overpaid bureaucrats at the top. Last November we witnessed a pathetic display when the Wexford Council of Trade Unions got together with local bosses to publicise that the county had the lowest number of strike days in the 26 counties, and was therefore a good place to invest in. Rather than regretting the low level of confidence and militancy they celebrate the fact that the bosses have little to fear from the unions.

There is an alternative to “social partnership” (a fancy description used to con workers into thinking that they are now equal partners in running the country... something Bernie Cahill and Larry Goodman must be splitting their sides laughing at). We have to replace ideas of a “national interest” with “class interest”. We have to recognise the reality that Ireland is run by the rich in their own interests.

The WSM opposed the PNR and PESF, and we are campaigning for a ‘No’ vote to the PCW. We want to end collaboration with the government and the bosses. This means building a grassroots movement within the unions which is capable of challenging the bureaucrats’ control and giving solidarity to those in struggle. It means establishing networks across the jobs so that common claims can be lodged.

It means having independent working class politics. This leads to taking action to win, which in turn gives people increased confidence.

One very good example of what is possible was last year’s Dental Assistants strike. When refused payment of their 10% arbitration award three hundred of them went on strike. They were followed by seven thousand health board staff who came out in support and then there was the threat of a total stoppage by non-medical staff in the health service. They won!

The Trade Union Fightback network (which used to be called Trade Unionists and Unemployed Against the Programme) of union activists is urging a ‘NO’ vote to the Programme for Jobs. They don’t expect to win a majority. Both the union journals and the mainstream newspapers are almost totally refusing to print their arguments against the deal. Inside the unions most workers only hear the views of the leaders.

There is a point to their defiant stand. To assert basic trade union principles, to argue that workers have different interests to their bosses, and to point to the need for an alternative to the conservative, bureaucratic and undemocratic rule of the union leaders is necessary. It is through such campaigning that we begin to make contact with other members who want change, and to bring our arguments to greater numbers.

In the course of such a campaign we can also begin to discuss the ‘nuts and bolts’ of the alternative. Do we need a public sector wage claim, how can we formulate claims involving large numbers in particular industries, how can we best defeat the Industrial Relations Act, what sort of opposition should we try to build within our unions... All these questions need to be addressed. The best way to do is by bringing together interested trade unionists. The vote ‘NO’ campaign of TUF provides one opportunity.

There are TUF supporters in many unions and areas of the 26 counties. For further information write to the Chairperson at 10, Comyn Place, Dublin 9 or telephone 01-375760.

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