

Capitalist crisis and union resistance in Ireland

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Late 2008 saw the Irish capitalist class wage a major ideological struggle against the Irish working class. They called for workers to bear the brunt of the capitalist crisis. Print media, TV and radio carried segment after segment where well-paid commentators argued that workers, in particular public sector workers, were earning too much, had overly generous pensions and that the public had unrealistic expectations of public services.

We were told that in order for recovery to happen we would have to have all these rolled back. Private sector workers, we were told, were over-paid and had to become 'competitive' again. The offensive quickly shifted from rhetoric to reality. A significant number of private sector workers have had pay cuts in the months since. Many private sector workers and large numbers of contract public sector workers lost their jobs. By the middle of 2009, a huge pay cut had been imposed on the public sector and detailed plans had been drawn up for a new round of cuts in the Autumn. Yet at the end of the summer the supposedly cash-starved government found €60 billion of public funds to buy up the banking sectors dodgy loans to property speculators.

This is an offensive on Irish workers at a level that hasn't been seen in over two decades. A joke has been doing the rounds on the left that it represents the greatest transfer of wealth in Ireland since the Cromwellian conquest. But while that was one older, traditional ruling class losing its property on a mass scale to a newer section, the NAMA transfer has been from workers to the existing rich.

At the start of the crisis, the Irish unions were in a weak condition; 20 years of social partnership had seen rank and file organization collapse and the arrival of often anti-union transnationals had seen a massive decline in union membership in the private sector. A very large percentage of jobs created during the Celtic Tiger boom were in non-unionised workplaces, particularly in the services sector. As might be expected, this has meant that organized resistance has been limited and often only occurring in local and desperate circumstances. But nevertheless there has been limited resistance, what have we been able to learn from this?

At our Spring National Conference in April, the WSM collectively summarized our experiences in the workplaces during the opening months of the offensive as follows.

5.1 The crisis has revealed for all to see how weak the unions have become at the grassroots level. A majority of WSM union members found themselves in situations where their local branches could not be called functional in any real sense. Our current position paper assumes a functioning union structure at the local level and is entirely based around this which meant that those members had little or no guidance about what they should be doing that could actually be implemented in the time frame.

5.2 The attempt to build a network of militants across public sector unions failed after a lack lustre but not insignificant start at the meeting of public sector workers in the Davenport hotel. The cause of that failure is a mixture of only token involvement by the left and the undemocratic & bureaucratic informal organisation it started from and the high levels of disengagement with unions that exists even within unionised workplaces.

5.3 In terms of workplace organising we can identify three situations:

- a. Unionised workplaces where there is a reasonable level of rank & file activity. That is where people have contact with their union representative and there

are general meetings to discuss issues of importance where workers can enter into debate with their fellow workers as a group.

- b. Unionised workplaces where for whatever reason there is little or no rank and file activity as yet. In these cases the methods of involvement we advocate members carry out in the position paper may not be at all easy to implement in reality as they often presume such activity.
- c. Unorganised workplaces where unions do not exist. Again here there is a major hole in our existing position paper on the unions probably because we have the expectation that recruitment is the work of the unions rather than revolutionaries. However the experience of unorganised members and contacts is that attempts to join unions frequently result in unanswered calls or letters and that even in unionised workplaces it is not that unusual for attempting to join taking long periods and requiring follow up calls.

5.4 In the last months members who found themselves in situation a) were in a position to implement policy in a way that influenced events and are relatively buoyed up from this experience. However members in situation b) and c) were in a very different situation and in some cases have been demoralised by the experience.

This description was agreed shortly after the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) had called off the one day national strike that had been scheduled for March 30. Although this strike was canceled on the flimsiest of excuses the build up to it had demonstrated that the union movement was not perhaps as dead as some had thought. The momentum towards the strike had built massively in the aftermath of the February ICTU organized demonstration against the planned cuts. Over 120,000 workers had taken part in this demonstration, the vast majority marching as part of their union delegations. The WSM leafleted the length of the march as it passed our banner calling for a 'National Strike Now' before joining in at the end. At that point it was not clear that the union leadership, would call such a strike, within a couple of weeks under pressure from below and from factions within the union leadership (the CPSU going as far as staging a one day strike on their own) the date for the national strike was set for March 30.

OUR STRATEGY IN HINDSIGHT

In hindsight our strategy once the strike was called was ineffective. We recognised it likely that the leadership would call it off if the government offered any sort of concession; our response included trying to create a public sense of expectation through street postering, arguing and supporting arguments in individual workplaces for local action regardless and taking part in initiatives that aimed at some co-ordination of militants across the unions. These attempts included union officials and even a couple of union presidents as well as rank and file union reps and ordinary members but they proved too weak and fractured to even come close to providing an alternative leadership to ICTU. In the weeks between the February demonstration and the calling off of March 30th, WSM members faced the range of experiences in our workplaces summarized in the position paper above. Many of the experiences were not very positive as even in technically unionized workplaces some members found themselves unable to overcome the

lack of local democratic structure in their workplaces or branches. Because this was generalized across union branches all over the country this meant that the ICTU leadership kept a tight control of the build up towards the strike. Days before it was due to happen the government offered the most token of talks and ICTU seized on the excuse and called off the national strike.

The experience of the March 30 buildup led to demoralisation but looking beyond the surface it was far from a universally bad one. In a few workplaces, typically those where the left already had some influence and our members or others on the left had some experience of how to use union procedures properly, it was possible to argue for and pass motions that allowed some rank and file control of the strike process, sometimes in mass assemblies, sometimes through branch committees with functional delegate systems. This wasn't the experience of any but a tiny percentage of union branches in the country but it seems to have been the normal experience where there was a functional union democracy at the local level and even a slight left presence. Nothing like enough to make a difference but more than enough to suggest there could have been another outcome to those days.

Even where this did not happen, workplaces sometimes came out of the period more organised than they had entered it, because of the period of preparation for March 30 and the build up to the February demonstration. This was probably the experience of just under half our members who were somewhat active union members in this period, itself a fraction of WSM union members. A confirmation that even a handful of left activists with sufficient preparation can sway very much larger numbers of their fellow workers where the conditions – in particular the holding of assemblies – have been created. In such conditions workers could move quite quickly in this process from a fairly typical fear of union militancy (at the start it was quite normal for officials to feel they had to reassure workers that they were not trying to push them into a strike, the reverse of how anarchists like to imagine things) to one where there were unanimous votes for strike action.

GENERAL INIATIVES

It's important not to overstate this. Attempts by the left to use this new confidence in workplaces to launch more general initiatives based on getting these members on the street failed. The attempt by the SIPTU Education branch for instance to launch a general initiative under the title of 'Grassroots Unite' failed to go anywhere despite getting the use of union headquarters for a founding meeting. The demonstration called from this meeting attracted only a handful of the two thousand branch members, despite the fact that the vast majority of these members had been voting for industrial action in the preceding months. This and the similar tiny turnouts of the September 2009 anti-NAMA demonstrations exposed how isolated the far left and republicans are from the working class in general. None of the various demonstrations or stunts called by the left parties and their fronts since February have attracted more than 1% of the number who took part in the February demonstration day (and most have seen far less). On the other hand the September 2009 community sector demonstration organised by SIPTU on a working day saw 10,000 march, demonstrating that there is still a willingness to mobilise. This is a reminder that small left groups cannot substitute for the mobilizing power of the union movement through hard work alone.

One major problem was certainly the weakness of the left. Despite the usual tendency of organisations to talk themselves up, the reality is that there are a tiny number of left and left-republican activists on the island. Anarchists and others on the libertarian left are a minority within this left but one that had grown significantly in this decade, but beyond the question of number, the impact of the libertarian left in particular during the February-March period was far less than might have been expected. This was because this was not the sort of struggle we had been preparing for, nor had it emerged from the sectors we had been looking at as a source of militancy. Our attention had been focused elsewhere.

OUT OF FOCUS

The period of intense 'anti-capitalist' summit protests that ran from Seattle to Genoa generated a discussion among many participants about how best to organise locally. There was the right discussion to be having but perhaps it was too driven by the search for exciting new methods of the sort that had revitalised and reinvented the left around the summit protests. This is not surprising, the rhetoric of the official union movement was a million miles from that of the 'anti-capitalist' movement and at least some of the organisational methods of each were almost counter-poised to the other. On top of this, across many sections of the movement a set of ideologies came to dominate that wrote off the unions as the outdated, traditional, male, etc, remnants of former years. I don't intend to consider these theories in detail here beyond saying that even in their most advanced form they seemed based around conditions that existed in a very few industrial areas for a brief span of years when the actual reality of unions as they have existed in different places and times has been very much more complex. There isn't and never was a single union model. Finally and not insignificantly because many of the new activists from the summit protest movement were young and often students they were overwhelmingly concentrated in temporary, part time and seasonal employment. The idea of 'organising locally' coming out of the summit protest movement was open to being literally interpreted to restricting organising to where ever you happened to be working.

One outcome of this was that many on libertarian left followed a set of tactics which concentrated on marginal workers in insecure employment. Apart from reporting on struggles and the work of individual members in their workplaces much of our collective writing and activity from 2000 onwards tended to concentrate on 'precarious' workers in harder to organise sections like retail and alternative unions (in Ireland for instance in the form of the Independent Workers Union). In terms of the libertarian left this was an international pattern that flowed from the Euro Mayday parades in Italy and elsewhere to the IWW organising drives in Starbucks which were concentrated in the USA but which also spread internationally.

The problem with this approach is that it has had very limited returns for the effort put in. This almost-exclusive focus needs to be questioned. Yes, it would be nice if such workers were organized, but, given our tiny numbers, does it make sense that this is where we are putting a lot of our thought and activity? In terms of resistance to the crisis in Ireland, it pretty much has had no returns; none of this work or writing prepared us for the actual situation we faced as the unions started to mobilise. What did turn out to be of some use was the traditional activity that some members had been in a position to carry on in this period. What was a pity was that we hadn't taken the steps to encourage more to do likewise and to spend the time working out a

critical collective approach to doing so. As we threw things together early in the new year there simply wasn't the time to get up to speed in the limited time available.

It is clear that we should have ambitions way beyond trying to build what amount to small affinity groups of like-minded workers in a couple of workplaces. It is clear that where militants have the required level of knowledge about how unions work, in organised workplaces, it is possible to create situations in a climate that breeds both grassroots life into the union and pushes the vast majority of the membership towards a militancy that they initially start off fearing. If this is possible, why settle for less?

This is not an argument against organising more precarious sectors. However would it not make more sense (as some have) to on the one hand concentrate on building rank and file power among workers who are organized and on the other hand concentrating organization drives on those whose terms and place of employment gives them some real power? There are interesting examples from the USA of this being applied with considerable initial success among health workers in Vegas and hotel workers in Chicago, a success measure in double digit wage increases and similar benefits. These are important for a couple of reasons, firstly because they are areas of growth in what would be viewed as non traditional sectors. These are not blue collar industrial sectors, these are not male-dominated sectors of employment and both have a high percentage of workers of colour. Many of the grades (in particular cleaners) would be considered precarious, but part of the strength of these drives was they were organising into general unions rather than craft unions (that is nurses and cleaners would be in the same unions rather than separate ones). Rather than expecting the precarious workers to fight on their own they can draw on the collective strength of the core workers they are alongside in the same institutions.

WAVES OF ORGANISATION

From the strategic point of view, it would seem to make more sense to imagine a wave of organization that starts with workers who are concentrated into larger workplaces and whose strikes have some real social power than with a wave that starts with the most marginal workers who often have little intention of sticking around in a particular temporary employment. The point of workplace organizing should be to win and to create a sense of workers' power that can then spread outwards. From that point of view we should aim at fighting our early battles not where we are weakest but where we have the greatest strength. As the examples above suggest, the form of organisation (e.g. general rather than craft workers) should be one that can bring in what would be considered precarious workers in the sectors targeted. In the Irish case this would include reversing the waves of outsourcing of the 1980's and 1990's that saw cleaning and catering jobs in particular being separated off from the main employer in schools, hospitals and universities. This would also mean bringing an influx of new members into large workplaces, such an influx can help shake up and invigorate existing workplace organisation.

In the short term, in particular in relation to the crisis, we face two problems. The first is the reality that knowledge of union procedure is quite thin on the ground. The complete lack of militancy in the unions over the last couple of decades and the death of rank and file structure has meant that in most cases there were no mechanisms that allowed members to simply pick up this knowledge through participation. This need not be a very serious problem as it is relatively easily addressed through training. More importantly as the public sector strike on the 24th November

demonstrated when workers are thrown in at the deep end without training mistakes will be made but successful spontaneous organising will overcome many of these.

The more serious problem is the huge sector of the workforce in Ireland that remains unorganized and the fact that the unions lack the skills to organize these workers even if they had a serious commitment to doing so. There is however a cart and horse question here. How reasonable is it to expect workers in vulnerable positions to take the lead in organizing their workplaces into unions that seem unwilling to take the steps needed to defend the interests of those members they already organize? What is the point of joining such a union? The answer to that question is probably one to be found in winning a couple of significant victories that demonstrate that the power of a union is not in the lawyers and negotiators that they can provide but in the power of workers standing together.

This article is intended to open a debate on where we should put our energy, it is nothing even vaguely approaching an advocacy of how an organising drive directed at workers in a strong position can be carried through. However there are already many anarchists with both positive and negative experiences of such drives, I refer to a couple of US examples above. An acceptance of the general line of argument put forward here would start with an investigation of these struggles and be followed by an examination of how, if at all, this may be applicable where you live. Much of the organising experience of the last few decades has been forgotten by the movement as a whole but the information is out there, we need not reinvent the wheel.

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