

Croke Park proposal shows why we have to take our unions back & organise to win

Andrew Flood

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It is quite incredible that the majority of the union leadership had the nerve to stay in the Croke Park talks and return to us, the members, asking us to vote for such a terrible deal. All of the unions should have had a ballot before entering into negotiations and we should have voted to refuse to enter discussions at all as long as a billion euro of cuts was a precondition of talks. Once we entered on that basis, nothing good could come out of talks. And after making the mistake of entering on that condition, all the unions should have had a change of heart and walked out once the reality of what would have to be accepted became clear.

We have to ask ourselves how we have found ourselves in unions where the leadership was allowed take such an approach. And we have to work out how we create unions that we control and which will help us organise together to defend our common interests.

How has it come to this? We can blame the union “leaders” and there’s no doubt that the fact that politically many of them are tied to Labour (and Fianna Fáil) is relevant. We can blame their lack of ambition, their constant repetition of the mantra of “There Is No Alternative”. We can blame the fact that most of the union leaders see their role as being to mediate between the members and government/employers rather than to wholeheartedly represent the members.

All that is true but we must not be content to continue to blame “the leaders”, the implication of that being that if we could replace the current leadership with a stronger or more left-wing one things would be different. We should recognise that we have failed to engage with our fellow workers and union members and attempt to break that sense of fear, apathy, hopelessness or anger.

It is time for every one of us to take responsibility for trying to turn things around. We have to stop referring to “the union” as something outside of ourselves and begin to see that our unions are OURS. We have to stop seeing “head office” and “the officials” as anything other than employees of the union – our employees who should be taking their instruction from us. And we have to convince our fellow workers that there is a benefit to engaging with the union structures and organising to resist. This can be hard. The poor record of the unions’ leaders means many members have disengaged from their unions and are even talking about resigning. That anger is understandable but it isn’t going to help us resist austerity, in fact it would make our resistance

harder. We need to convince fellow workers to not only re-engage with the unions at the local level but to transform the way we view them.

In your workplace and in your union, that means you have to take on that responsibility — there's nobody else to do it for you. By booing Jack O'Connor or any of the rest of the leaders who have stolen our movement from us, we can let off steam. Shouting for a "general strike now" might make us feel more militant. But the reality is that right now the majority (maybe even a large majority) of union members are unlikely to join an effective strike. There is a huge job of work to be done to convince the fearful, the apathetic, the hopeless and the angry that their future lies in standing together in solidarity and that things don't have to be as they are.

For an effective strike to be possible we need to take control of union structures, dump the current leadership and replace them, not with an alternative leadership but with a new type of union which will take control back into the members' hands. We need to re-create a union movement whose primary function is to resist and obstruct attacks on our wages and conditions.

We need to return to the situation where decisions are made at the base of the unions by the mass of members rather than the leaders at the top or even branch committees. If we are to fight effectively then we need all of the membership actively involved in organising that fight. We need local union meetings that are packed out, where there is real debate and where clear decisions are made. We need co-ordination between local sections that is not reliant on full time officials. Where there is more than one union in a workplace we need meetings of all the union members of that workplace to build solidarity so that when one union acts all unions act.

In this the year of the anniversary of the 1913 lockout we need once more to build the sort of unions that the government and employers are afraid of. That means unions that are clearly capable of going beyond protest marches or one-day token strikes to conducting the sort of ongoing industrial action that can force defeat on the government. In the public sector, because there are 300,000 of us and the country depends on us to function on a day-to-day basis, if we build that sort of organisation there is no way a strike could last more than a few days. If we build that organisation they will be afraid of the cost of strikes, not us. The point for us is not to strike as an act of protest but to strike in order to win.

That's where you come in as a Union member. So if you wish to boo the leadership, go for it. If you want to shout for a general strike now, go for it. But you know that more is needed. Go back to your branch and look at ways of taking steps that organise our resistance at ground level. Support all those who are resisting cuts.

Let's begin to show practical pragmatic solidarity with those in struggle. Let's say No more cuts — anywhere or to any service. Let's collectively have the confidence to say we're not taking any more of this. Let's encourage non-cooperation and support other groups of workers so that they are not victimised for refusing to co-operate with the austerity agenda.

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