

National strike in Ireland called off

March 30th national strike off – Employers' retreat but ICTU talks are not a victory

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That the very threat of a national strike was enough to force government and IBEC (Irish employers' organisation) to change their position demonstrates the power the working class holds when we threaten to withdraw our labor. For all the media attempts to convince us we are powerless and that class struggle is a thing of the past when faced with the reality of the organised working class standing up both bosses and state were keen to avoid any confrontation that could illustrate and encourage our collective power.

That is the positive side of the story. The negative side is that the union leadership who were in any case largely forced to call the ballot for the national strike through pressure from the grassroots of the union have now called off the strike on the weakest of excuses. Activists within the unions knew all along this was a likelihood, most of the union leadership are almost as afraid as the bosses of workers getting a true sense of our collective power. From the start, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) leadership has sought ways to convince workers that we had to pay for the crisis, to share pain in their terms, despite the fact that during the long years of the Celtic Tiger there was no sign of the bankers or property speculators being keen to ensure workers got to share the wealth.

Sharing the pain?

Indeed for all the talk of sharing the pain there is no sign of the super rich taking any share of the burden whatsoever. The public sector pay cut cost after adjustments is expected to save €900 million. €900 million that was generated by taking a sizeable chunk of cash out of the pockets of tens of thousands of workers. Yet within a few days of the cut being announced ten of richest people in the country were able to walk away from €400 million on debts arising out of the Anglo Irish Bank share deal that didn't work out for them. As the bank had been nationalised this €400 million comes out of the same public funds that the €900 million will go into. So tens of thousands of ordinary workers have taken a pay cut so that 10 multi-millionaires can avoid paying their debts.

This is not a single example. At the same moment that public sector workers are receiving their first pay checks with the 'pensions levy' pay cut we discover that post bail-out Irish Nationwide awarded retiring CEO Michael Fingleton a €27 million pension payout. Apparently there is no problem with the super rich getting pensions payouts that are unimaginable to ordinary workers (whether we are in the public or private sectors).

The ICTU 'alternative'

The plan ICTU came up with is riddled with problems, on the 'pensions levy' for instance it more or less states an acceptance of the levy, merely quibbling over the details of the current implementation. This wasn't a surprise to those who had heard the rumors I reported on in a previous article for indymedia that ICTU may have been behind the idea of the pension levy as a more acceptable way of implementing a public sector pay cut. At the time of that story being published some close to ICTU threw hysterics about its publication, now it is clear it was a warning of the likelihood of development like that of today.

The ICTU leadership has been described as close to if not part of the golden circle of business and state that run the country. There is some truth in this, not only are their wages several mul-

tuples of those of ordinary workers but in many cases they are double or treble jobbing through appointments to various state boards. If not part of the Golden Circle many of them certainly seem to move in the same social circles and have almost as little understanding of the lives of the ordinary workers they supposedly represent.

But its important we don't feel helpless in the face of this latest ICTU betrayal or worse still become cynical in thinking that whatever we do will be cancelled in a similar manner. Some union branches didn't just ballot of the ICTU approved wording but took the precaution of holding additional ballots to try and tie down the ability of the leadership to call off the strike. The Dublin Education branch of SIPTU for instance included a ballot specifically identifying the pension levy pay cut as the target.

It's not over

The nature of the crisis is that workers cannot come well out of these talks; indeed we are going to be hammered in the emergency budget of April 7th. This means there will quickly be a need for more strike action and ballots on this action. What we need is to get ourselves organised in every union branch in the country so that we can control our struggle from the rank and file rather than being pawns on the ICTU chessboard to be taken in and out of play at will.

What the build up to March 30 has revealed starkly is the absolute hostility of the mainstream media to any idea of workers taking collective action. The likes of Joe Duffy (major state radio talk show host) have worn themselves out in trying to create a hostile atmosphere not only to strikes but even to the ICTU demonstration back in February when his show was 90% dominated by callers, many of them claiming to be public sector workers, who had no intention of marching. Listening to it, the clear impression that was intended to be created, was that no one was going to march and anyone who turned up on the day was a delusional fool. What has been impressive is how many workers have shrugged off the media propaganda campaign, both in terms of 150,000 who marched on the day and the tens of thousands who vote for and prepared for strike action despite an unceasing barrage of hostility from the mainstream media.

To be fair the mainstream media is not 100% uniform, if it did it wouldn't be able to do its job, as Pravda discovered, as everyone would simply assume the opposite of whatever was said. So a tiny percentage of other commentators are allowed. In today's Irish Times for instance Vincent Brown questions the justice of the idea of sharing the pain in the context of the likes of Fingleton being paid 200 times what a full time carer gets. His column concludes, "We are not all in this together, just as we were not all in the Celtic Tiger together. The patriotic duty is to subvert the social order that brought us this "balance"." The language of patriotic duty is tricky as it's precisely the language that is being used to trick workers into not fighting back but that aside his observation is spot on.

1% short in IMPACT

The media barrage was not without costs, we can be certain for instance that that barrage of hostility made the difference in the IMPACT (public sector union) vote between the 65% who voted to strike and the 66% that was needed under union rules. And then in turn the media seized on the 1% shortfall they created to argue for the cancellation of the entire national strike!

But lets not blame the IMPACT result entirely on the media. Before the strike was called the IMPACT leadership had been undermining the idea of a strike at branch meetings, this obviously came back to bite them in the ass when the ICTU line was forced to change under pressure from below and they were then expected to deliver a yes vote from the very audiences they had been previously telling it was futile to strike. Reports from within IMPACT reveal that thousands of members were never balloted (the media is silent on this but imagine the noise they would be making if the ballot had narrowly passed). Indeed inn many unions the ballots were badly organised. IFUT (professors union) initially circulated a ballot with two identical options to choose between! Often ballots happened without any general meeting of the membership at which the issues could be discussed. It's not hard to see why this is so, in workplaces where general meetings did happen very often they would end up formulating motions for more radical action and/or more far reaching demands.

The union leadership is caught between a rock and a hard place of its own making. The years of social partnership combined with the Celtic tiger meant that they could deliver modest improvements without the need for any organisation at the rank and file of the unions. Indeed rank and file organisation was often a threat because the gains were so modest. The bankers and property speculators may not have been demanding that we 'share the wealth' when the times were good but many union members were wondering why this was not being fought for with around 1/3 consistently voting No to the various national plans. Now that the crumbs have stopped falling from the table, indeed now that the modest gains that were won are being attacked the union leadership find it lacks the experience of how to organise a fight back as well as lacking the commitment to doing so. But in the new atmosphere of claw back its no longer possible to avoid a fight, the cuts will keep on coming as the crisis deepens. But an effective fight back will have to involve returning power to the rank and file of the unions, something the leadership is terrified about because they have also lost much of the skills that once allowed them to control radicalism. In comparison with the '70's union leaders are now distant figures, most of whom look and sound far more like employers than fellow workers.

What is coming?

A final note. ICTU may be calling off March 30 as a national strike but many workers will still be taken action on that day. Workers in Dublin bus for instance had their existing conditions of work unilaterally torn up and after delaying their strike for the promise of talks have seen those talks collapse. A citywide bus strike will have a huge impact on all Dublin workers and we can expect the media to be working over time to sow division between transport workers and other workers just as they have tried to set private sector against public sector. It is a very great shame that the bus strike did not start with the national strike as this would have made very clear the common interest we all share as workers in resisting that offensive. We certainly should be doing what we can to support the bus workers in their struggle.

Some union sections passed additional ballots on the M30 action that may mean they take action regardless of whether other unions have called off the national strike. ICTU don't have the power to order individual unions not to strike, it may well be that some entire unions will strike anyway. And there may be pockets of workers who are already angry enough and well

organised enough to simply stay out of work on Monday, regardless of the strict legality of doing so.

In any case the momentum gained in the build up to March 30 must not be allowed to dissipate. The new talks will collapse (or ICTU will return with an unsellable deal). Further attacks on workers pay and conditions are on the way. If the leaks are true then we can expect the April 7th budget on its own to contain attacks of 2 to 3 times the magnitude of the public sector pay cut, if perhaps spread out in a more general way to target all workers and the unemployed. And in Ireland there is no sign of the crisis in capitalism easing so we can be sure that within months if not weeks further attacks will be unleashed by the state as well as the continuing and constant attack's from employers in the form of layoffs, pay cuts and the imposition of short weeks. Even those of us not taking action on March 30 will need to take action in the near future, we need to learn the lessons from the last weeks and start to build networks in and between each and every workplace that can deliver real control of this struggle into our hands.

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