

Why did the union leadership cancel the Dec 3 national strike in Ireland?

On the cancellation of the Dec 3rd strike and the disastrous ICTU negotiating position

Andrew Flood

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The cancellation of the December 3rd strike is a blow to the developing movement against the cuts on the scale of the cancellation of the March 30th strike at the start of the year. The so called compromise ICTU have been negotiating for is a further blow, it seems designed to drive a wedge between workers and fails to answer the main problem public sector workers have, the inability to take further cuts. But the strike that did happen on 24th November has brought 250,000 workers into their first experience of the power we collectively hold and points towards an alternative.

The announcement from ICTU while we were picketing during the national strike on the 24th that a second strike had been set for December 3rd caught most strikers by surprise. Initially workers, most of whom were on strike for the first time ever, were concerned that we would be going out again so soon. But once the news sunk in the idea of having a second strike before the budget cuts made sense, its much easier to stop cuts happening then reversing them. All over the country union sections and branches began the work of organising for a second day of striking and effective pickets.

As news leaked that Peter McLoone was offering the government 10 or more days unpaid leave many of those union militants doing this organizing were perplexed and a certain level of demoralization set in. This unpaid leave 'compromise' made little sense when the main issue was our inability to take further pay cuts. We were already down in the region of 13% in comparison with what we should be taking home once you factor in not only the 'pension levy' pay cut but also the tax hikes and the failure to pay the partnership increases. Another 5 to 7% pay cut is not an option, whether or not extra holidays are added as a sweetener. 54% of public sector workers were earning less that 40,000 before the cuts had taken place. In particular those with families are already seriously struggling to make ends meet. For them unpaid leave is not much of a compromise as they cannot afford the loss of earnings in the first place.

Divide and rule

This ICTU proposal also plays into the hands of the main strategy of the capitalist class in attacking workers in Ireland. We are many and they are few (very few) so what they fear more than anything else is all workers uniting against them. To prevent this they have played a very successful media strategy of getting one group of workers to fight another. So private sector workers target the public sector workers and public sector workers target the unemployed etc. Anyone listening to talk radio cannot but be horrified by the ease with which large numbers of workers have failed for such a simple trick. Sure these shows are manipulated but they do highlight the glaring problem in the IC~TU 'strategy'.

This ICTU negotiating strategy plays into the hands of those who want to build on this division. Unpaid leave will not only mean a further serious reduction in pay for public sector workers it will also mean a serious deterioration in services for all workers. For all the hot air about the 'unsustainable' public sector when it gets down to the services provided the same workers who fall for this rhetoric quickly realize that they need the medical, education and other services that public sector workers provide. Unpaid leave will mean fewer workers providing these services on any given day, that has to have a knock on in terms of services. Already too few workers are trying to cover for all those public sector workers who have already lost their jobs because they were on temporary contract or through other means. The unit this writer works in has about 25% fewer staff then 18 months previously.

On the positive side the leaking of the 'compromise' meant that for the first time serious discussions about the need for an all out indefinite strike started to take place. It was becoming increasingly clear that nothing else would force the government to back down in its offensive on pay and conditions and switch instead to targeting the super rich to pay for the crisis. The discussions of whether or not to accept the ICTU 'compromise' was simply one of whether workers thought we were organised enough for such a fight and for each individual how long they thought they could afford to go without pay during such a strike. Such a decision will not be taken easily but it is now on the agenda.

Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice ..

This is the context in which ICTU's announcement that the December 3rd strike is off has come in. Back in March they called off the strike on the 30th for no reason other than the promise of talks which turned out to be meaningless. This had a massive demoralizing effect on the membership and took all momentum out of the struggle against the cuts until this Autumn. Now it appears they have made the same 'mistake' all over again, called off a strike without anything having been agreed by the other side. And what is on offer is not only crap it is counter productive in terms of uniting workers against the capitalist class.

The problem appears to be that the ICTU leadership have no concept of what to fight for or how to fight for it. Twenty years of social partnership means they are used to accepting the premise of neoliberal economics and restrict themselves to tweaking that logic into in a gentler form. And in terms of tactics to ICTU its all about negotiation and more negotiation with strikes being a very, very last resort to be used only to demonstrate that the negotiators have some muscle

behind them and should be treated seriously.

This approach could sort of work during an economic boom. The capitalist class was making so much money that it could afford to throw workers in Ireland the odd bone in return for industrial peace. But for every cent they gave us they took a euro and they were careful to give the cent's in a way that would be automatically undermined once a crisis hit.

In general wage rises under partnership were at or slightly above the inflation rate. But workers saw significant increases in take home pay, a trick that was achieved by repetitive reductions in the percentage of our wages that went on tax. That trick was only made possible because the boom and in particular the housing bubble provided the vast sums through stamp duty that were needed to keep public services going. But when the boom ended this was no longer true and it meant the means to destroy the limited gains workers in Ireland had made were built into the system.

Where should the money be found

ICTU have so bought into this logic that when the government demanded a further 7% cut in public sector pay to save 1300 million ICTU immediately accepted the logic of the governments position that the 1300 million had to come from the pockets of workers and not from the rich. This is not even remotely the case, for instance a 1% wealth tax which would hit the richest 1% the hardest would bring in around 1500 million. We should be striking for this and more as an alternative to the pay cut, more because a 5% wealth tax would provide the money to reverse the cuts and launch a job creation program though expanding the provision of services. That demand is something all workers, public or private could unite around.

Our unions should not be agreeing to cut our wages and arguing with the government about how exactly to do so. Our unions should be refusing any such cut and insisting that the needed finance be raised by going after the rich, whether through a wealth tax or some other means. Our unions should be seeking out ways to unite all workers in a common struggle and included in this the tens of thousands of private and public sector workers who have already lost their jobs.

It's a waste of time to look at the existing ICTU leadership to lead that sort of fight. Nor is it the case that there is an alternative leadership in the wings or even that all union members are already in the mood for such a fight. The truth is that although workers are starting to get ahead of the ICTU leadership for the most part until recently most workers also saw no alternative.

The question of leadership is not a question of who is at the top of the unions giving directions but rather of what the base believes. The alternative leadership we need is not to be found sipping tea in a back room of Liberty Hall but rather is a set of ideas and methods that we need to collectively develop together. Chief amongst these is that we, and by we I mean all workers, unite around a demand that it is the capitalist class and not the working class that must pay for the crisis. Until that unity is achieved they will continue to play the game of setting one set of workers against another.

We also need to develop the ideas that will enable the hundreds of thousands of unionized workers to not only take control of our struggle against the cuts but to bring in the over one million workers who are not currently organised and build solidarity with the further half million thrown out of work. That is no small task but it is what we have to achieve unless we want to continue to face further attacks on on pay and standards of living and if we want to see jobs being created rather than destroyed.

One minor step in that direction is the creation of the Social Solidarity Network in Dublin. *“The Social Solidarity network is a grouping of people who have come together to provide a forum for workers and communities to unite to resist the attacks and to build links across the many struggles which will break out over the coming months.”* This is the sort of initiative that needs to be spread across the county. The SSN has called a protest for Budget day from 5-7pm outside the Dail, you’ll find more details at www.indymedia.ie

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