

# **From apathy to rebellion: the water war in Ireland**

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No one saw this coming, not even the veteran activists. Hundreds of thousands resisting neoliberal economic policies would have been difficult to imagine even at the height of the Campaign Against Home and Water Charges. Although that campaign, primarily fighting against the regressive Household Charge and the subsequent Property Tax, was nationwide, it never quite built the momentum that we've seen with the anti-water charges campaign, though not for lack of effort on the part of activists. The CAHWT failed in its objective of defeating the Property Tax, the resistance effort however was not in vain; it prepared the ground for the current phase of struggle.

In grassroots communities across the country, CAHWT community groups gained confidence and experience in how to organise while building lasting networks with each other. Importantly, the CAHWT also normalised political protest; people grew accustomed to seeing protesters and sympathised with them, however in this instance when it came to the crunch they still paid up when the government told them to.

So despite some positive outcomes, the CAHWT failed, leaving many campaigners thoroughly demoralised as they had campaigned hard for over two years only to see the majority of people pay the new regressive taxes. As 2014 was coming to an end, the government began to prepare for the implementation of water charges after their success with implementing the Property Tax and many exhausted CAHWT groups felt there was not much point in fighting it based on the public reaction to the last government attack.

As Irish Water began its program of water meter installations nationwide, likely targeting the areas of high compliance with the Property Tax first, they were unexpectedly met with localised resistance. Water meter contractors would arrive in an area to carry out some minor excavation works and meter installations to find members of the local community dismantling their safety barriers, climbing on their equipment, or standing so close to machinery that it could not safely be operated. These efforts were widely publicised on social media, particularly Facebook, where they received significant levels of support. Many of the people involved in this direct action were elderly people or people who had not been involved in anything like this before.

Anti-water charges campaign groups began to form on their own, in areas where there was no recent history of resistance. Momentum appeared to be building but still exhausted CAHWT groups were trying to recover their energy and were not as active as they had previously been.

The Right2Water campaign, composed primarily of trade unions and left wing politicians and parties, launched in August 2014 with a loose set of criteria for joining: "All you need to be part of the campaign is to believe that water is a human right and that water charges should be abolished." The campaign came to serve as an umbrella group for community groups, left wing parties and trade unions to affiliate with, but did not have a formal democratic structure and could not direct members to particular courses of action.

Then on October 11<sup>th</sup> 2014 a large anti-water charges demonstration exploded onto the scene, with attendance in the tens of thousands and a vibrant energy that further added to the sense that a new wave of people was indeed ready to stand and fight. Many were new to political activism but their energy boosted the veteran campaigners whose organising experience meant this new anti-water charges campaign hit the ground running.

This surge in working class activity has been building for a long time, fostered both by constant government attacks on our public services and standards of living and also by the persistent and extraordinary efforts of the ordinary people who fought these attacks. While this campaign has

been extremely popular by any measure, many of its participants view it in different ways and are hoping for different outcomes.

Political parties normally look at campaigns like these as a way to gain publicity and to pull in a few more activists with the aim of increasing their share of the vote come election time. From that perspective, campaigns are just things that you participate in to strengthen the party, not to strengthen the working class.

Anarchists look at campaigns like this as an opportunity for working class people to build our own knowledge, confidence, networks, organisational capacities and political consciousness so that no matter who is in government, we will be able to organise to defend ourselves.

## **State power**

The world that we want will never and can never be delivered through the state. Though many engaged in struggles around water charges and housing sincerely believe that the capture of state power through parliamentary means can be used to end poverty and homelessness, this is simply not possible. While elections appear to be a shortcut to political power, in reality they are a trap, designed to undermine, split, roll back and destroy working class political power and organisations.

When a determined left wing government is elected global capitalism acts to dismantle this. This is either done through subverting a country's economy which we have recently seen with Syriza in Greece, or a more violent approach is taken, as was the case with Chile in 1973 when the left wing government of Salvador Allende was overthrown through a US backed military coup of the Chilean military.

What we should be aiming for during the current surge in working class activity is not to build political parties who would act on our behalf but instead to strengthen our existing campaign groups with a view to maintaining and increasing our own capacity to defend ourselves. Building a stronger working class movement should be our short term goal, not building a party up for the next electoral circus. Undermining and destroying a political party is a lot easier than a militant working class.

## **Building working class power.**

If you have never been involved in political activity before, the anti-water charges movement has functioned as a way of acting collectively with others to directly confront Irish Water through protest, marches, blockades, and most vitally, the boycott of payment. This has also been a campaign in which people's perspectives on how politics is played out have shifted markedly. In one hand, campaigners hold a placard, and in the other they might hold a book on Irish economic history, or a document on county council housing allocation procedures, or a text on abortion rights or the struggle against the occupation in Palestine. Once people got active, the scope of their understanding of the world increased, water charges were just the springboard to interest in other struggles, one of the dots to connect with the many others in the fight for a different world.

## **Political consciousness.**

In many community based anti-water charges groups there are left wing activists who hold fairly solid understandings of how capitalism works, and the history of working class struggles around the world. Most of these people will have some experience with pro-choice campaigning, Palestine solidarity campaigning, LGBT rights campaigning, anti-racism campaigning etc., so over time their knowledge and perspectives can come to shape those of other members of the group who may not previously have thought much about those things. This is a positive development but it can be undermined by the strong dislike that people have for the manoeuvrings and often self serving actions of political parties.

## **International solidarity.**

The Detroit Water Brigade visited Ireland at the invitation of the Right2Water campaign in order to stand in solidarity with us and share their own experiences of fighting against the restriction of access to water.

Greek flags became widespread at demonstrations in Dublin to express Ireland's solidarity with the people of Greece as they struggled against the Troika's decision to shut down their economy in response to the election of a left leaning government.

Bolivians attended a recent demo to express their support for our cause as they fought a similar battle for control of their water resources and infrastructure. Actions such as these boost the morale of protesters here by highlighting the global significance of their local actions.

## **Anti-racism.**

Myths about immigrants are widespread among the working class today. They range from stories about how Polish people can get an additional dole payment in order to 'socialise' with Irish people, to how Muslims are somehow the most serious threat to our society. Fantasies such as these are not just factually wrong, they are extremely dangerous. This divisive, right wing narrative fosters an atmosphere of hate that facilitates violence against minority communities and the rise of the far right who ultimately serve the ruling class.

These fictions about other, more vulnerable sections of the working class are part of a time honoured practice of divide and rule. If the ruling class can turn us against each other on the basis of religion, sexuality, race or even employment status, we are easier to economically exploit. Challenging and countering racist superstitions can only be effective if socialists, anarchists and other anti-racists are active in class struggle within our communities.

If you have campaigned alongside someone for two years, put up posters together in the rain, went door to door for the first time together, leafleted, marched, organised with them, when the topic of immigration comes up you can have a proper conversation about it and challenge any factually incorrect assertions or racist myths directly.

Notably, campaigners can argue from a position of credibility against those who are not politically active who express anti-immigrant or racist views. When some people were expressing the view that 'We should take care of our own first', while actually having shown no interest in

Irish homeless people prior to the refugee crisis, the most effective voices countering this narrative were those engaged in feeding the homeless on a daily basis. It's very difficult to argue for helping Irish people in need over foreign people in need when the people helping Irish people are saying that everyone should be helped without delay or exception. Being active in struggles gives credibility and weight to anti-racist arguments.

## **Networks and campaign structure.**

Through this campaign, a nationwide network of campaigners, socialists, unions and academics is in the process of forming. While community groups form the primary organisational units of the campaign, trade unions (through the Right2Water umbrella group) have acted as the figurehead of the campaign, funding the major national events and engaging in media work nationally and internationally in support of the campaign.

R2W does not direct the activities of local groups which are largely autonomous and self directing. This means the structure of the anti-water charges campaign is totally different from its predecessor, the Campaign Against Home and Water Charges (CAHWT). Arguably, the water charges campaign could not have come into being so rapidly if it wasn't for the CAHWT laying the groundwork for the next phase of struggle.

The CAHWT had a centralised structure set up by left wing political parties and groups which met regularly to coordinate activity and fundraising for the campaign. The formal structures of the group were in place early in the campaign which is totally different from the decentralised campaign that we have built to fight Irish Water.

The current decentralised structure seems to be a lot better for morale as campaigners don't have to endure the constant attempts by rival left wing parties to manipulate the formal structures of the CAHWT for their own electoral ends.

Academics can provide context to a struggle by providing information to campaigners about why water privatisation is being pushed and how transnational capital relates to Irish Water.

Understanding the logic of the market, free trade and neoliberal economic ideology is no longer something that only political anoraks study, it's now what campaigners talk about on the bus to Dublin for a demo.

## **Direct action.**

Irish Water contractors being blockaded from installing water meters was one of the first types of direct action seen in this campaign. This was entirely non-violent and consisted of local communities organising physical blocking tactics so contractors could not install meters on their water mains. This led to the police being deployed to screen contractors from protesters but since we usually came out in large enough numbers, the police were unable to control us and so, frequently resorted to use of violence.

This aspect of the campaign is significant as it shows quite clearly what happens when working class people engage in effective actions to defend their interests. Very quickly police violence is used against us in an attempt to break our resistance.

The media then omits police violence from their reporting and instead implies that the protesters were actually the violent ones. In this struggle, this tactic has mostly failed, as

virtually everyone has a smartphone, and so when violence occurs it is plain to see that it is the police, private security and contractors who are the guilty parties.

Through the experience of neoliberal government policy, direct action, police violence and media lies a significant number of newly politically active people learned rapidly who their enemies are. In a matter of three years, politics in Ireland is in the process of transforming from a spectator sport, into a normal community activity.

## **Where to from here?**

The water charges are just one area in which the state and capital are attempting to squeeze more out of us. Housing is most likely to be one of the major sites of struggle over the coming years as vulture capitalists continue to speculate on and dominate the Irish property market. As homelessness figures continue to rise, and rents remain sky high; we will have to find ways to effectively confront and defeat these forces. As long as we maintain the momentum we've picked up during the battle against Irish Water, we will be in a very good position to get started building a housing movement. A great deal of self education will be needed by our campaign groups if we are to be effective but a number of groups with campaign experience have already begun the process of transforming themselves into housing action groups, as part of the Irish Housing Network.

The most developed groups are based in Dublin but they are sharing their experience with others around the country and are providing advice on how to get set up.

This process will not be complete until Irish Water is defeated but with the boycott holding strong and more people joining it all the time, we appear to be on course to defeat Irish Water.

Build the boycott, build working class power!

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