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Bad News for Spring and De Rossa

Dermot Sreenan

1996

OVER THE LAST few months we've witnessed the level of industrial action jumping from virtually none to disputes erupting in An Post, Eircell, Trinity College and the Civil Service. The government has asked the Irish Congress of Trade Unions get their members into line, i.e. to ensure no more disputes arise. The bad news for our government is that it appears that this current round of industrial action is not about to quickly fade away.

That the Government can talk to the ICTU leaders as friends is indicative of the cosy relationship which has come about over the last ten years. There has now been a decade of "social partnership" agreements between themselves and the trade union leadership. 'Our rulers' in the Dail expect trade unions to police their own members, i.e. to discourage disputes and encourage the membership to leave it up to the full-time negotiators to hammer out a "good deal" for them every three years. This policy, however, does not extend to saving jobs as

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the former workers from TEAM Aer Lingus, Digital (Galway), Waterford Glass, or Packard can tell you.

These national agreements see the unions enter into negotiations with the government and employers, usually complete with staged 'breakdowns' and threatened withdrawals. Then a programme arises ensuring that pay rises are kept to a minimum in return for some – mostly ignored – promises about job creation, social welfare, taxation, etc. The reality of the PNR, PESP & PCW is that they put severe limits on what workers can look for but place absolutely no limits on what employers can demand from workers.

The highly restrictive Industrial Relations Act, which was brought in following a commitment in the PNR, has led to a virtual decommissioning of the most powerful weapon open to any organised workforce, the strike. To give examples of how restrictive the act is ...under the Act seven day's strike notice has to be served on the employer/company before any action is taken, which allows time to recruit strikebreakers or to move production elsewhere.

Furthermore it is illegal to have a dispute over one person's rights without first going through months of procedures. So if a shop steward is sacked you can't walk off the job without the risk of the union or even the individual strikers being sued. On top of all this, the social aspect of each agreement has been ignored. The unemployed, the great lost tribe of our time, has largely remained forgotten about.

Ireland has one of the largest levels of long-term unemployment in Europe. This is despite profits well in excess of European averages being made by both Irish and multi-national companies here. All of this is adding to a rising discontentment within the Irish workforce as we head into towards the winter when the government hope to hammer out yet another national agreement.

Despite all this, the membership of unions continues to grow. The Irish Nurses Organisation grew by 3,000 over April

and May as looked like they were heading towards a dispute with the government. The shop workers union, MANDATE, also experienced a rise in membership as a result of the strike in Dunnes Stores. Far from frightening off workers, as some union officials claim, a fight to improve wages and conditions puts heart into people and encourages them to join a union.

52% of the entire Irish workforce is in a trade union. This is the one of the highest percentages in Europe. Small battles are being won all the time, despite the national agreements and all that goes with them. Workers have not forgotten how to fight or what their rights should be. The battles will continue.

But another fight will be within the unions as members struggle to gain control over their own struggles. It will have to be wrested from a bureaucracy that has tightened its grip on the reins of power over the last ten years. The trade union movement has to be brought back to fighting for the rights of workers rather than watching the ICTU throwing them away over a negotiation table.