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Looking back on the battle of the Bins & Lessons Learnt

Workers Solidarity Movement

2005

The campaign against the bin charges was one of the largest organised mass movements of resistance to the state in recent years. Local organising groups popped up across the city. It climaxed in the winter of 2003, with the jailings of numerous activists in quick succession. Here we talk to Dermot Sreenan, a member of the WSM who has been a prominent activist in the campaign from the off.

What are the bin charges?

The bin charges are a charge for the collection and disposal of domestic rubbish. This service was, and still is provided by the local council. Funding which is supposed to be supplied from central government, from our taxes, to the council for such services has been drying up. The city manger, a glorified accountant, introduced a charge for the collection of rubbish. It is a classic tactic, take a public service, impose a charge, make it profitable, and then add the final part of the jigsaw, privatise of the service.

Why would anarchists be arguing for lower taxes?

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Retrieved on 9th August 2021 from struggle.ws
This article is from *Red & Black Revolution* (no 10, Autumn
2005)

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The bin-charges are frequently referred to as a double-tax, or a stealth tax, which I prefer. You pay the same for your bin regardless of your personal wealth. It costs over 180 euros to get your bin collected if you earn 12,000 euros, if you earn 22,000 euros, if you earn 122,000 euros. No matter what you earn, you pay the same charge. In summary, it's unfair, and this bin-tax is another attack on our class and we fought against it for that reason. At the same time as this tax was being imposed, millions were being found in off-shore accounts set up for the ruling class to avoid paying any tax at all. The rich avoid paying taxes, and the rest of us have it deducted at source.

How did the campaign start off?

The campaign started off in a room in a club, with a wide selection of various people from different left wing groups. The Socialist Party and the WSM had the experience of being in the campaign that had defeated the water tax, and we knew that this tax was coming because it had been predicted in the estimates. (The 'estimates' is name given to the budget that the city manager put forward as the costs of running the city for the year. In this year he had put in a new cost for collection of rubbish.). There were representatives from other groups there, the Socialist Workers Party, the Workers Party, and Sinn Fein. I recollect that there was about twenty or so people in the room, and it was decided to contest this issue with a mass based non-payment campaign. A steering committee was set up, and we started building the resistance to this new tax.

What was the involvement of anarchists in the campaign?

We were involved from the very start of the campaign. I was on the steering committee for four years, being campaign secretary for the first two. However it's one thing to have someone sitting on a committee but far more important to us was to build real local groups so that when the fight really came we could have every street organised for that battle. I and a number of comrades were involved in getting the first meetings off

the ground in the area where we were living, the Liberties. We started to ask people to not pay and not to apply for waivers (an exemption from paying granted to those on low incomes). We started to get a local group off the ground. We worked closely with some people from the Socialist Party in this task. In other areas of the city members of the WSM were taking the same initial steps in getting the campaign and local groups going. For us it is a very important step to get people involved in the struggle, to get them to saying no to this new tax, to show them that resistance is not futile. That was the only way that a real mass non-payment campaign could be built. Many local meetings attracted hundreds of our neighbours

Was there any involvement of globalisation/anti-capitalist activists in the campaign?

No, not really. I think that there was a perception that the campaign wasn't for them. Of course this is not true, but many of these activists live in rented accommodation and it was unclear as to whether the landlord would deal with the charge or the tenants. So perhaps they didn't see it as affecting them. Most of the people involved in the campaign were older, people who were settled, with children and grandchildren, while the anti-capitalist activists tended to be much younger. The anti-bin tax campaign was also more of a local / community campaign. So perhaps the anti-capitalists didn't feel that there was a place for them or that there was an easy way for them to get involved. Also, the campaign was probably seen as being dominated by the old trotskysist left, and many of the anti-capitalists have a poor view of these groups, having had experience with one or other of their various front organisations.

How did the campaign develop?

Initially we held local meetings. We would invite the city councilors to come and meet their electorate and explain their position on the bin-charges. Most declined to show up, so we would line up chairs with missing councillors' names on them. Then the meeting would discuss how to organise the area to

drive up membership of the campaign, and how to increase non-payment. Certain areas got local groups off the ground very quickly, and these then continued to meet, organising stalls and getting leaflets into all the streets in the area. Some areas only ever had one meeting and never seemed to meet again.

What strategies were used?

The primary strategy was to ensure non-payment. This meant taking on the arguments of the local loyal Labor Party people who tried to rubbish our campaign, and who promised that some leader or other would get rid of the bin-charges. Labour would look after the people, that would've been a first!

The main strategy in the early stages was to get recognised as a campaign, to let people know that this tax was being fought against, and to spread it far and wide and to drive up non-payment and in turn increase the membership of the our campaign. In the later stages when they stopped collecting rubbish we blockaded the bin trucks, either in our estates or at the depots, arguing that they collected all the bins or none of the bins.

What were the organisational structures of the campaign?

A major conference was held, the campaign was launched, and the steering committee was elected and recognised. The anarchists tried to ensure it was as democratic as possible, and we had motions passed at conference that all major decisions should be taken at All-Dublin Activists' meetings which would meet regularly and the job of the steering committee would be to keep the campaign functioning, and in the media, in the meantime.

On paper, the organisational structure was good, but decisions aren't made on paper, they are made in rooms full (or not so full) of people. In reality, the organisation of the campaign was poor.

so we weren't in a strong position in terms of influencing the campaign across the city. So the structure was ignored, and so too were decisions from the all Dublin meetings. The real place where anarchists lost the argument was in the one over elections, and we lost that because we couldn't argue it in all the areas where people stood for elections. We couldn't hold back the stampede for power...

What next?

Well, it will only be a short time before we get to take them on again. Fresh from this victory, I would only say it will be no time at all before they dust down their plan to start charging us for the water. It may sound ridiculous that they could attempt to charge us for a resource we appear to be deluged in everyday, but our chance to take them on will be at hand, and if we can learn from this, it will be our chance to put this privatisation monster back in the box.

22 people in a room. The next campaign should start with 22 people in your estate, talking about how you are going to not pay the new tax for water, or whatever it might be.

It should not be left up to far left political parties to divide up areas and organise them. Sure they can have a meeting about the issue, initiate something, but you cannot leave it to them because in a few years they are just going to ask you to vote for them. When we needed the numbers in this campaign we didn't have them and I firmly believe that's for a few reasons. Real functioning local groups were not built in enough areas, and the campaign did not spread into enough areas of the city, and there was no real support for the workers when they needed it from the Unions.

When an issue like this comes around again, local meetings have to happen quickly in our communities. We cannot wait for word from the central steering committee, we cannot wait for a central campaign to get off the ground, what each of us can do is organise a meeting in our areas and get people prepared for the next fight.

Working class people must seize the opportunity; they must own the campaign from the start and view it as an opportunity to bloody the Councils noses and put a halt to their gallop towards privatised services.

It seems that the anarchist arguments weren't that influential in terms of the campaign structure. Why do you think that was ?

The anarchist argument was won in terms of having a structure where the All-Dublin Activists' meeting was the supreme decisions making body of the campaign. If that All-Dublin meeting was comprised of delegates from real functioning local groups, then I think it would've worked. But, that was on paper, and campaigns are not won on paper. The anarchists were weak, there wasn't enough of us. We only had sustained activity in one area, and some activity in a few other areas. In some places we only had one individual living locally,

Properly functioning local groups weren't set up in every area, and the All-Dublin Activists' meetings were often poorly attended (and at times its decisions were ignored by the steering committee).

As anarchists we wanted local groups to function properly and organise their area for themselves. What I mean by that is that the local people are in charge of the local group, that they are calling the shots, they are electing their delegates to the All-Dublin activists' meetings. For people to seize control of their own lives and to take the fight to the authorities, the local group had to work in a very clear and openly democratic way, with those involved taking the decisions and acting on them. This way people could learn things like speaking in public, drafting leaflets and convincing their neighbours to join the campaign.

In other areas, and because of the nature of politics of their parties, once a leafleting network was established and membership was being collected, members of the Socialist Party or the Socialist Workers Party were happy to represent the views of the area, without going to the trouble of holding that many meetings

Instead of a campaign based on strong local groups, whole swathes of the city were carved up along political party lines. Local meetings would be organised, and depending on which party, the Socialist Party or the Socialist Workers Party, was stronger on the ground, that area was then run by that party. Over a period of time, the campaign evolved where each party took charge of particular areas of the city, and local groups were dependant on their contact on the steering committee for leaflets and information. In some cases local groups only existed on paper, or only existed in the sense that someone from the steering committee would drop off leaflets to a group of people in the area, who would then distribute them.

To make matters worse, co-operation amongst members from both parties was poor. Meetings would happen and

people from the other party wouldn't be informed about them. So while there was a level of co-operation between the two major trotskyite parties, the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party, but there was also a deep level of distrust. The Socialist Workers Party felt that they had ignored the anti-water charge campaign (which successfully resisted a similar tax a few years previously) and in this way they had lost an opportunity. They did not want this to happen again and so were involved from the very start. The Socialist Party had worked in the previous campaign, but this time had to work with the other Trotskyist party. The steering committee was split, having members from both parties represented

Did all local groups function like this?

In areas where we lived we tried to encourage our local groups to meet regularly and to be in charge of their local campaign group, but unfortunately there weren't very many of us so we could only be active in a couple of local areas. Some of the other smaller political groups that were involved, such as the Irish Socialist Network in Finglas and Working Class Action in Cabra and East Wall, also tried to build local groups that were run by local people. Later on, these were among the most active parts of the city campaign. Unfortunately though, the groups decided to run candidates in the local elections. So ultimately, this led to the most active groups still being asked to elect someone to sort out the problem for them, instead of sorting it out for themselves.

What did the campaign publish?

The campaign published a news bulletin that was aimed at householders, letting them know the non-payment figures, what moves the council had been up to, and most importantly encouraging people not to pay. It reacted to the council's threat that they were going to pursue people for money owed. Letters threatening court action went out with alarming regularity, followed by some court summonses. We produced

of Joe Higgins to the Dail that truly defeated the "Water-Tax" seven years ago. The anti-bin tax campaign never even reached the same strength as the water-tax campaign and I think it's because people believed the myth. Thousands of people were involved in the campaign against the bin-tax, but in the end all they were asked to do was to vote for one protest candidate or the other.

Many of the local groups were organised with an eye to the election. The major organisers from the political groups saw themselves as potential candidates. They were happy to often be the sole point of contact between local groups and the steering committee and the campaign. They didn't believe the myth, but they certainly propagated it. They knew that if the campaign developed in this way, that no other 'independent' candidates would emerge. Also, that if they were the ones who brought the news of the campaign, it stands to reason that they would most likely be the ones to stand up for the people and represent them when the elections come

So many local areas didn't meet too often, and when they did it was only to listen to news of how the campaign was faring. Batches of leaflets were given to people to distribute, but they were usually just the main campaign newsletters. In effect, local groups didn't develop an autonomy that they required in order to give people a sense of ownership of it. People needed to be drawing up local leaflets, instead they were being handed ones from the steering group to hand out. There were lulls in activity, but I think over a period of time people didn't feel like they owned the campaign, even in their own areas.

What lessons can we draw?

I think that the founding principals of the campaign were fine, a mass campaign of non-payment, but it's in the structure and application that this campaign failed and failed badly. Local groups have to come together, function in a democratic way, and bring others into them, and then those groups have to be federated upwards. The way this campaign started was with

The campaign knew that the Unions would have a very important role to play in this fight but as usual when it really came down to the crunch, the leadership and the officials ran away from the fight, and into the arms of the bosses. In South Dublin we heard of union members being ordered back into their bin depot by officials. When we were blockading the bin depot at Grangegorman a member of the Mandate trade union (who was also a supervisor) read out the injunction to the campaign and warned us that we were breaking the law.

In effect, if you were in the union, and you wanted to make an issue of this, it didn't appear to me that you were going to get any backing from the officials. In fact those bin workers who were deeply sympathetic to the campaign and didn't pay the double tax themselves, were so paranoid that they would only meet secretly with the campaign. I think that is testimony to truth behind the Trade Union motions in favor of the campaign. The members were in support; the Union leadership was most definitely not going to make this a battleground. The leadership of the Unions did what they often do; they calmed members down and de-escalated at every opportunity.

Did the campaign approach the bin-workers ?

Yes, we did this officially though SIPTU and also unofficially by talking to many of the men who were living in neighborhoods where the campaign was strong. Like I mentioned before, there were many bin workers who were sympathetic, but they knew in their hearts that the Union, despite having motions in favor of the campaign, was not going to support them. The bin-workers, when they were caught up in a blockade, were often quite cheerful and never displayed any animosity to the activists. They would just go back into their cabs and call their supervisor.

How did Electoral Politics influence the campaign ?

This is a good question because I think that this had an overwhelming influence on the way the campaign worked, and developed. The illusion was sown early on that it was the election

the news bulletin with the constant message of "Don't Panic – Don't Pay".

The council waged a very heavy and direct propaganda war against the campaign. Very expensive council advertisements were aired on prime time television telling people that a tsunami of waste was coming their way if we didn't recycle. The truth was the council didn't care about re-cycling, they just wanted money out of the householders (for instance, initially they levied a flat charge and didn't take into consideration how often or how full peoples' bins actually were).

How much of a mass mobilisation was there when non-collection of rubbish started in parts of the city?

Eventually, when non-collection started in the city, it started in areas where the campaign was not strong. This made perfect sense from the Council's point of view. They had all the facts and knew the places where there was high payment (and no active campaign), and which places were defiant (where the campaign was strong and well supported). The sad truth was that although the campaign had grown, it hadn't grown strong enough, and when non-collection started it meant that there were a lot of political activists going out to areas to try and ensure that collection of the bins took place. We blockaded the trucks in our estates to force the trucks to take the rubbish. A lot of people were nervous as they were being intimidated with talk of 'breaking the law' etc. and all too quickly injunctions preventing the blockades were granted and arrests were made.

What was the campaign's reaction to the arrest and jailing of activists?

The campaign ended up with a lot of people arrested in a very short space of time. This was the time when the council, ably assisted by the state, went all out to smash the campaign. Joe Higgins and Clare Daly (Socialist Party) got arrested out in Fingal, and they were followed by 12 more arrests from the city campaign. I think people were shocked at the lengths the council were prepared to go to get in their precious tax, but road to

profit has to be paved. Nearly four thousand people marched to Mounyjoy prison. The unions pledged their support, and to stay strong. Over a 1,000 people marched from Cabra (a very strong part of the campaign) to the gates of Mountjoy prison again in a tremendous show of solidarity from one area.

After this initial stand-off the Council got smarter and started doing non-collection only from certain depots in the city. We knew that non-collection was going to be implemented in the city area. The campaign took a decision to attempt to blockade, to stop all the trucks from going out on their routes, when we knew that they were doing non-collection from a specific depot. This meant getting to the bin depots very early in the morning, at around 7.00 am. The campaign stated that all bins would be lifted up or none of them would be picked up. This was the idea behind the tactic of blockading the depots.

The campaign didn't really have the numbers to blockade all the depots successfully, and once again the union leaders, who spoke of support outside the prison walls, couldn't be counted on for tangible support when this started. In short, I would say that the effect of the arrests was to intimidate people and I think it worked.

Why and how did the escalation end?

After two days of blockades on all depots where non-collection was happening, I got a phone call from someone on the steering committee saying they were calling it off for the third day. I think people were tired, but it's interesting to see how bad the decision making process was in reality. No meetings, no real discussion. Just a phone call saying that there wasn't going to be any pickets for the third successive day.

Later, the Campaign took a decision to start blockading commercial refuse collections that were run from certain depots in the evening. This meant it was easier for people to get to them after work, and we had some successful blockades. Injunctions,

threatening jail if we didn't leave, were read out to us and we ignored them when there were enough of us.

After a good protest outside City Hall, I remember attending an activist meeting. I was still on the steering committee and I remember the reluctance of the committee to go downstairs and talk to the activists assembled, because they hadn't a line worked out for the tactics to be employed at this stage. I wanted the activists meeting to decide what we should do next, that was the closest thing we had to getting a democratic decision. There were many elements of farce, but this was the height of it. Eventually that meeting decided to concentrate our forces on one depot, early in the morning and to see if we could at least block that one for the day. The decision was passed by most of the people in the room, a clear majority.

The following day as I cycled down in the rain to the depot, I got a phone call from someone in the Socialist Party who fought on this issue in Cork, and had nothing to do with the Dublin campaign, informing me that someone else had called for another depot to be blockaded instead. We were left with about 8 people to blockade that depot in the lashing rain. There appears to be a scant regard for democracy in certain parties.

The escalation ended because we couldn't sustain it, there weren't the numbers. There weren't the numbers because when the campaign was being built. Certain parties were happier to establish leaflet droppers than real functioning local groups. Weak local groups meant few people active on the ground, which meant no numbers for the blockades.

What kind of support the campaign get from the trade unions?

I don't think there were many problems getting motions passed in favor of the campaign. This happened in many of the trade unions, but what did this mean in real terms? It was more difficult to get money from them to support the campaign, so all the money that was used in the campaign had to come from donations or memberships.