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Significant minority say No to union leaders

PCW vote

Workers Solidarity Movement

1994

AS EXPECTED the Irish Congress of Trade Unions Special Conference voted to accept the Programme for Competitiveness and Work, by 256 to 76. Unions opposed included the ATGWU, TEEU, MSF, NUJ and the FUGE which represents low paid messengers and cleaners in the civil service.

The vote in favour is a setback for militant trade unionism. The PCW is about pay restraint, job losses and promotion of a fictitious 'partnership' between workers, bosses and government. It is a continuation of the PNR and PESP which hammered the low paid, unemployed and growing numbers of poor.

A campaign against the deal was mounted by Trade Union Fight-back, an alliance of rank & file shop stewards and activists. Sadly the current level of demoralisation among union members meant that their campaign was a pale shadow of the one waged against the PESP in 1991. TUF has since disbanded. However if there was a drop in the numbers campaigning there was no noticeable drop in the numbers opposed to such deals.

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Within the largest union, SIPTU, 29,308 (32%) voted against in a turnout of about 50%. In most jobs where even one individual made the arguments for a 'no' vote they were usually successful in winning over the majority. This was done in a situation where the union literature carried only pro-PCW propaganda. In the best tradition of SIPTU style 'democracy' the Branch Secretaries were prohibited by head office from sending out circulars to members notifying them when Branch Committees decided to recommend against but the National Executive was allowed to put their recommendation actually on the ballot paper!

In Trinity College the shop stewards, representing 440 manual & clerical staff, countered the Executive by affixing their own "10 reasons to vote no" to each ballot paper. Here the vote against was 5.6:1. Similar tactics were used in several CPSU branches.

We have to face the fact that mass unemployment, mounting poverty and over two decades of centralised wage bargaining have left many good union activists demoralised. They are doubtful about the possibility of fighting back against the bosses and bureaucrats. The vote on the PCW hasn't helped.

Rather than get depressed at the failure of TUF we should be aware that large rank & file groupings are created when workers are fighting the bosses, are confident, and then find the union officials are trying to sabotage their struggle. The need for independent organisation within the union is then posed. Struggle creates genuine rank & file movements, not the other around.

At a time when workers are on the defensive and lacking in confidence any attempt to create such groups will attract only small numbers of activists. This is not to decry such attempts (where they arise from a genuine desire to take on the officials) but to warn against any unrealistic goals at this stage.

However all is not bad news. There are activists who want to fight back. Lately we have seen the COLT campaign to get the unions to fight C45s in the construction industry, the anger at threatened pay cuts and redundancies in Irish Rail and the

marathon strike at Nolan Transport for union recognition. The struggle is far from over.