

ICTU protest in Dublin: Workers angry over pension levy, jobs and wages

Elaine Gorton
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A reporting team from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a broad range of the workers taking part in Saturday's 100,000-strong protest in Dublin called by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. Workers were angry over the imposition by the Cowen government of the "pension levy," but also at rising unemployment, the spiraling cost of living and deteriorating wages.

Pat Fitzgerald is the chair of the 364 branch of the Unite trade union, which has played a leading part in the occupation of Waterford Crystal. Workers occupied the Waterford plant on January 31, after the company Deloitte, which has taken over the bankrupt firm, tried to close the plant and lock out the entire workforce, using hired thugs. Workers have remained there ever since. Within Ireland, the occupation has become a focal point for the vast opposition developing against the Irish government over the financial crisis.

Deloitte is on the brink of a deal with venture capitalists KPS Capital to drastically reduce operations at Waterford Wedgwood company, which currently employs around 6,000 workers worldwide. It is suspected that as few as 120 permanent positions and another 120 temporary would be retained out of a workforce of 700 at the Waterford factory.

Fitzgerald told reporters from the WSWs, "On January 5, the receiver was sent in and froze all the assets. They are apparently trying to sell the company as a going concern. There are enormous problems that we didn't anticipate. All the workers who worked on shifts at Christmas were paid by cheque and it bounced. All the money that was saved in a holiday fund just went, as did all the time in lieu.

redundancy money was to be paid on a phased basis. The statutory amount of €40,000 was to be paid upfront and the rest in weekly instalments of a thousand euros for 40 weeks. This deal was done because Waterford said it didn't have the funds. After the receivers came in, then all the payments stopped. So we were faced with workers outside not getting anything.

"KPS want to keep all the profitable parts of the business and lose the rest. They said that 140 jobs would be kept in total, 80 full-time jobs and 60 part-time casual jobs working in the tourist season.

"There is a €110 million deficit in the pension fund. The first thing the receivers did was stop any company payments into the pension fund. Through KPS the Bank of America gave the union €10 million to distribute and walked away, saying they would come back after it was all 'sorted out'! What are we supposed to do? This is an impossible situation. How do we distribute the 10 million? It's not enough. We can't honour the deal made for workers already made redundant. We can't cover the deficit on pensions, and we can't give the people who will be made redundant later anything. We want the government to make up the shortfall.

"We were in discussions with the receiver up until two weeks ago trying to resolve all these questions. And the receiver simply said that he was fed up, stood up and told us we were all sacked. He then brought in a big security team from Dublin. That's when we decided to occupy. And when the security team saw we meant business, they left pretty quickly."

"This is a five-star sit-in," Fitzgerald said. "We hope it can be resolved. The tourist season is coming up, and we hope that will put the maximum pressure on."

"A deal was struck in the summer with Waterford that the

Kevin Slater worked for SR Technics aviation engineers,

where more than a thousand jobs have gone following the closure of the company's operation at Dublin Airport. He said:

"SR Technics closed its operations down, and 1,200 lost their jobs. Aer Lingus [the national airline] gave a contract to France. All the workers were shocked. This contract was the bread and butter for Dublin. It is a big part of the economy. Ours is a skilled trade, and at least 5,000 other jobs will be affected by the knock-on.

"All of us on the demonstration are carrying green plaques with the names of areas in Dublin that will be hit by the closure. The government did nothing to help, even though it owns a 25 percent share in Aer Lingus. They gave the contract to France because they said our wage bill was too high. If this is true, then what are the French workers on? Everybody thinks we are highly paid, but this isn't true. The Celtic Tiger has gone, and we haven't benefited. It's just that the rich have been getting richer."

Paul Kearns, another electrician, said, "It's a myth that the lads in the hangar were paid a massive wage. They haven't even had a pay rise for the last three years."

Sharon is a Dublin hospital worker. She said, "The government aren't listening to us. The levy is a pension tax. I will lose €300 a month. Our jobs aren't even safe. The bankers took millions, and they won't even be named. If we did anything like that, they would lock us up and throw away the key."

Pauline Doyle said, "I am marching because they want to take €200 away from me each month. I have a child, and the prices are high on food, clothes, everything. I'm a health care assistant, and I work hard. I work nights. Why should I have to pay? [The rock band U2's frontman] Bono doesn't even pay tax!"

Dennis O'Brien, Patricia Flannery and Francis Killeen work in the financial sector. Dennis said, "We have been hit by two levies. We have had no say in them. This pension levy will mean that people will lose between €70 and €250. The Department of Finance has been told to cut 4 percent off the payroll. Anyone taking a career break or job share is not allowed back to work. I am not allowed back to work. You can't claim social welfare, as you are technically 'employed.' "

Francis said, "The government introduced decentralisation. They wanted to move us out of Dublin. They spent huge amounts of money on property that is now not worth anything and is standing vacant. We are paying for others mistakes."

Steven and Dermot are Dublin firemen. Stephen said, "We already paid 6.5 percent out of our pay for pensions. They added this levy on top, and we now pay 13 percent. That's €80 a week. After tax allowances, a third of my take-home pay has gone. Most people have children and a mortgage, and this will hurt."

Dermot said, "Nobody has a problem contributing. But this is all public sector, not private sector. They aren't getting levied. This is not the end of it. There is talk of strike action."

Michael and James work at Trinity College, the University of Dublin. James said, "The pension levy is not fair. It attacks the public, not the private sector. The bankers are not paying. The government is not with the people. I'm on a good wage, and I can take a hit. But this will have a major impact on people with a low income. I am here marching for everyone"

Gerry O'Reilly works in construction. He explained, "All our overtime is gone. Our travel allowance is gone. We are back to a 39-hour week. This time last year we had 500 working in my firm. We are now down to 50. They have laid off a lot of workers. We are asked to do the work of two men—twice the work for less money.

"The pension levy is not all. The Construction Industry Federation is cutting our pay by 10 percent. That is €500 on top of the levy I have to pay. They are trying to pass the 10 percent pay cut to other sectors."



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