

Ireland: Waterford occupation continues as protests grow against cuts and closures

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Workers are continuing to occupy the Waterford Wedgwood crystal factory in Kilbarry, Ireland. The occupation, now into its second week, is to prevent the factory being closed with the loss of up to 700 jobs, 480 of them in manufacturing. Up to 60 workers are maintaining control of the factory at any one time, operating a shift system.

Last Tuesday, 12 Waterford Wedgwood workers protested at the Dublin offices of Deloitte & Touche, the appointed receiver for the failed producer, which had triggered the occupation with an attempted lock-out of the workforce.

A second demonstration of 6,000 was held in Waterford the next day. The "Save Waterford Crystal" Facebook group has attracted some 4,600 members from all round the world. Local supporters have donated mattresses, food, TVs and other unsolicited gifts and messages of support.

The workforce faces poverty and long-term unemployment if their jobs go. The Unite trade union is concentrating on finding a new owner and is backing the bid made by Clarion Capital for the plant, which would mean almost half of current jobs being shed.

The Waterford Wedgwood occupation is only one example of a wave of social protest against the consequences of the economic crisis that has thrown the former "Celtic Tiger" economy into recession. Students, bus drivers, taxi drivers and teachers have all held demonstrations, while a number of strike ballots are taking place.

On one day last week, Dublin saw three separate protests. Bus drivers opposing plans by Dublin Bus to sack 290 staff and remove 120 buses from the roads demonstrated outside the Green Party's offices. Protest organiser Owen McCormack told the *Irish Independent*, "The Greens especially have betrayed us. We didn't

expect a whole lot out of Fianna Fail regarding public transport, but it is a core Green policy."

The Green Party are in coalition with Fianna Fail.

Bus Éireann intends to make 322 workers redundant and dispose of 150 buses. Despite conceding a strike ballot, the National Bus and Rail Union's (NBRU) preferred option is to see jobs lost through voluntary redundancy and a freeze on recruitment. NBRU General Secretary Michael Faherty stated, "We are resolute in our determination to ensure that a voluntary severance package is on offer to staff...on a seniority basis."

The same day, two separate protests were held by the city's taxi drivers. One, recognised by the SIPTU trade union, was attended by around 30 drivers, calling for an appeals process regarding decisions made by the industry's commissioner. Another unofficial demonstration saw up to 1,000 taxi drivers marching through the city centre, calling for a cap on the number of taxi licences issued. Further protests are planned.

The following day, between 15,000 and 25,000 students marched through central Dublin in opposition to government plans to introduce third level fees, a policy long trailed by Education Minister Batt O'Keefe. The student protest was joined by a Waterford Wedgwood worker, John Coughlan, who told the *Irish Times*, "We feel that the kids today need to stand up, they need to say this is enough, treat us with a bit of dignity and let us get on with our lives."

These protests are in response to attacks on living standards already taking place, but worse is to come. Following the collapse of talks between the government, trade unions and employers, the so-called "social partners" Taoiseach (prime minister) Brian Cowen announced a swingeing packet of cuts directed against public service workers.

Cowen said, "We are experiencing the most profound economic crisis in 70 years. In addition, the Irish

economy is suffering from the aftermath of a large housing and construction boom and a loss of cost competitiveness."

"This is being exacerbated by the decline in the value of sterling relative to the euro which is placing extreme pressure on the Ireland's base of exporting companies," he continued.

Fully €1.4 billion of €2 billion total savings this year is to come by drastically raising the pension payments of large swathes of working people. Further cuts were announced over the next five years, with a total targeting savings of around €16.5 billion by 2016.

Pension deductions are to increase by 3 percent for those earning just €15,000, rising to 6.4 percent for someone on €35,000 and topping at 9.6 percent for the few earning €300,000 plus. Someone earning around €770 a week before tax, such as a skilled nurse, will pay an additional €53 weekly towards their pension—over €200 a month more.

In addition, Cowen announced cuts in overseas aid, changes in legal and medical fees, cuts in childcare supplements, and "administrative savings." This appears to involve the non-payment of a scheduled pay increase. Another €1 billion is intended to be saved next year by a pay freeze. Some €300 million is to be saved in the competitive tendering programme for infrastructure.

Cowen, who has overseen multi-billion euro payments to prop up Irish banks and is in the midst of organising another €8 billion hand-out, said that the pension cuts were guided by "principles of fairness and prudence."

He insisted that the social partners agreed with the cuts, differing only over how they should be made. Speaking for the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) David Begg made clear why they disagreed, stating that "we would have had the worst of both worlds where we would put out some proposal to our own people who might simply rebel against it and would not really be able to assimilate why it was happening."

But there was no question of social partnership being rejected. Begg insisted, "The challenge of trying to find an accommodation in such difficult circumstances has just eluded us at this time, but we really should not draw down the barriers."

Speaking for the employers' federation IBEC, Director General Turlough O'Sullivan made placatory noises, commenting that "no trade union leader will ever surrender the requirement to defend the interest of a particular group of workers." He then offered cooperation, adding that "I believe our people will act very responsibly

in this."

A spokesman for the Impact trade union responded favourably, stating, "It would be very premature to jump to the conclusion that there will be threats of industrial action."

The unions have reason for nervousness regarding the response of their members. There are already 327,860 workers unemployed, 9.2 percent of the workforce, the highest since 1997. The monthly increase of 36,498 people, 12.5 percent, is the highest since 1971, while the annual increase of 146,412, 80 percent, is by far the worst recorded, exceeding a 39 percent rise in 1980.

Many of the job losses are in the construction industry, in which total employment has fallen by 20 percent over the year. Not only unskilled workers have been hit.

The collapse in employment, along with the increase in benefit payments, will further undermine the government's financial position. Writing in the *Irish Times*, Jim O'Leary warned that despite the cuts announced by Cowen, tax revenue was likely to decline more sharply than predicted, causing a €3 to 4 billion shortfall in 2009 alone.

O'Leary admitted that previously he had not been a fan of social partnership because, in his view, public sector workers got too much. Faced with economic collapse and the need for the trade unions to police their members, he has changed his tune. "Our need for social cohesion is greater now than it has ever been, and partnership, for all its faults, is an obvious institution to look to for achieving that solidarity."

O'Leary continued, "It is in nobody's interests that attempts to sort out the mess we're in disintegrate in the face of serious social unrest."

The Irish business and ruling elite recognises that the trade unions are the crucial factor in maintaining order and disciplining the working class. Struggles to defend jobs and living standards cannot be led by organisations so completely dedicated to maintaining the interests of the profit system, which provides them with their own privileged existence.



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