

Ireland: Trade unions call off March 30 national strike

Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
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The Irish Congress of Trade Unions has presided over a shameful rout. Only a month since over 120,000 workers marched through Dublin in protest at government austerity measures and cuts, the ICTU has called off its planned one-day national strike scheduled for March 30.

Five days before the strike was to take place, the ICTU announced that it had accepted the government's invite for talks. It claimed that a non-specific agreement to review government borrowing—with the ICTU favouring a 1.5 percent increase on the government's proposed 9.5 percent target—promised a "fairer" distribution of the economic pain caused by the global recession.

The unions have said that this would provide the basis for negotiations to convince the Fianna Fail/Green coalition, led by Taoiseach Brian Cowan, to adopt the ICTU's "10 point plan for national recovery"—a wish-list that is not worth the paper it is written on.

The ICTU's action is rightly seen as a betrayal and there have been calls for the resignation of ICTU head David Begg for overturning numerous mandates for strike action. But such justified outrage can not obscure the fact that little else could have been expected from Begg and company.

The ICTU is not an organisation that even in the remotest sense defends the interests of the working class. It is an integral part of the machinery of capitalist rule in Ireland. For over two decades it has sat in various tripartite agreements with the employers and successive governments. Its role as a "social partner" was to help implement policies and pay agreements that maintained the attractiveness of the Celtic Tiger economy as an investment location for global corporations.

What led to a breakdown in this cosy set-up was the plunge of the world economy into recession and the devastating impact this has had on Ireland. Fianna Fail made clear that the precondition for a continuation of the social partnership was an agreement on the part of the ICTU to impose billions of euros in public spending and wage cuts, beginning with the imposition of the "pension levy"—a hike in taxation.

With anger amongst workers running high, particularly given the massive governments subventions to Ireland's banks, the ICTU pleaded for some cosmetic measures to be adopted such as a clamp down on tax havens. The objective was to provide the ICTU with a rationale for its collaboration with government, based on spurious claims that everyone would "share the pain".

The government and the Irish Business and Employers' Federation (IBEC) refused the ICTU's entreaties. Their plan is ensure that the victims of the deepening crisis are robbed of their livelihoods so that the bankers, financial speculators and the super-rich can maintain their lavish lifestyles.

The government has pledged a total of €5.5 billion to recapitalise Ireland's banks, using money largely drawn from the national pensions reserve fund. But while workers are to pay for the bail-out through increases in their pension contributions, Michael Fingleton, chief executive of Irish Nationwide building society—another recipient of public money-enjoys a €1 million bonus and a €27 million pension payout.

The ICTU found itself temporarily excluded from the corridors of power and felt obliged to organise some protest against the government. In part, it needed to do so in order to provide a safe channel for rising social anger. But fundamentally, its aim was to mount a show of strength to convince the government and employers

that its services were still required.

The last thing the ICTU was prepared to tolerate was the development of any movement that genuinely posed a threat to the interests of Irish capitalism. In fact, reports have suggested that it was the ICTU that originally came up with the proposal for a "pension levy" to help finance the bank bail-out.

From the outset, the ICTU proposed that the one-day protest strike be confined to those workplaces that had failed to implement a previous national pay agreement—thus rewarding those employers who recognised the continued benefits of "social partnership." Not all public sector workers were balloted over the proposed strike, while selected private sector workers were balloted separately.

Ireland's media was filled with denunciations of the planned action and of the ICTU for undermining the "national interest". All the opposition parties joined with the government in demanding that the strike was called off. In the end, the ICTU did not require much persuasion. When the main public sector union IMPACT returned a 65 percent vote for strike action, just one percent below the two-thirds majority required by its constitution, the ICTU moved rapidly to call off the strike.

Days before, the trade unions also sealed the fate of the occupation mounted by workers at Waterford Crystal. The eight-week sit-in was called off on March 22. Despite the principled and determined stand taken by the workforce, the Unite union ended up accepting the initial offer made by the company, which did not safeguard workers pensions and pledged to maintain only 176 jobs out of 450 and for just six-months.

Whatever claims are now made regarding the resumption of the "social partnership", the reality is that the trade union bureaucracy will work with the employers and the government to impose an emergency budget in April involving massive and sustained attacks on working people.

Just how severe these attacks will be is indicated by the *Irish Times*. It noted that the restart of talks was supposedly based on an agreement reached in January between the government, employers and the ICTU for cuts of €2 billion. However, "The target for reduction in spending in next month's budget could now be up to €6 billion." Additional cuts may also have to be made in Ireland's social welfare budget, it continued.

The ICTU has also effectively accepted what IBEC has described as a "lengthy pay freeze." IBEC's caveat that it will not stop employers who wish to increase wages on a voluntary basis from doing so is merely insulting.

As far as Ireland's wealthy elite and their political representatives are concerned, their policy towards jobs, wages and social services is to slash and burn. And their chief weapon to be wielded against the working class is the ICTU.

In the coming weeks and months, Irish workers will be told again and again that everything has changed because of the scale and depth of the global economic crisis. They will be asked by the unions to accept one sacrifice after another so that Ireland can weather the storm.

In reality, the various prescriptions proposed by the government, employers and unions will do nothing to resolve the present crisis. World capitalism is in the midst of a systemic breakdown. Its continued existence threatens a descent into slump, mass unemployment and all of the political and social dangers associated with the last great depression in the Hungry Thirties.

Workers cannot defend themselves without breaking decisively from their old organisations, based as they are on the maintenance of the profit system. A new party is required that advances a socialist and internationalist programme for the abolition of capitalism. Nothing less will do.

Those who agree with this perspective should contact the International Committee of the Fourth International and the *World Socialist Web Site*, and join the struggle to build such a party.



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