Strikes and occupations spread across Ireland

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Ireland has seen a number of strikes and workplace occupations in recent months. Strikes have involved dockers at Dublin ports, medical workers in County Tipperary, employees of the state-run Health Services Executive (HSE) and workers at drinks company Coca Cola.

At the same time, workers at a DIY store near Cork have launched an occupation of the premises in defence of their jobs, as have workers from travel agent Thomas Cook in Dublin, who occupied the firm's Grafton Street location in protest at its closure. The moves follow on from the occupation of Waterford Wedgwood by its employees earlier this year as the transnational implemented plans to close its Irish facilities at the cost of several hundred jobs.

These disputes are a manifestation of mounting class tensions. The Fianna Fáil-led government has imposed vast public spending cuts over the course of the past year, as it seeks to shift the burden of the economic crisis onto the backs of working people. Amongst other things, it has cut much needed spending on infrastructure, removed funding for medical treatment for the low paid, and increased taxes through the imposition of a regressive income levy. Cuts of up to €5 billion are being prepared for the autumn, as outlined in July in a report produced by economist professor Colm McCarthy.

At the same time, the government has opened its coffers to the financial elite by handing over billions to prop up the country's ailing banking system. Notwithstanding the speculative and in many cases outright criminal actions of this social layer, everything has been done to ensure the recapitalization of the financial institutions and to avoid raising awkward questions about their dubious practices.

In such conditions, sections of workers have begun to take matters into their own hands. The occupation launched by Thomas Cook employees in Dublin came in the wake of an announcement on July 31 that the Grafton Street office would close immediately, with the loss of all jobs. Facing the prospect of receiving next to nothing in compensation, 28 workers initiated the occupation in a bid to secure an improved redundancy package.

Having obtained a court order demanding that the workers end their action, police forced their way into the building on the morning of August 4 and detained the occupiers. Later, protesters gathered outside the court to call for the immediate release of the workers, and the presiding judge agreed, provided that the occupation was not resumed. In spite of the determined stand of the workforce, they will receive at best a minimal increase in their redundancy agreement, from five weeks pay per year of service to eight weeks pay for every year worked.

In the aftermath of the occupation, Thomas Cook's UK and Ireland CEO Pete Constanti made the outrageous statement that the demand of the workers for eight weeks redundancy pay per year of employment was "unreasonable and way out of line with the market." By contrast, company CEO Manny Fontenla-Novoa took home over £7 million last year.

Workers at a 4Home store in Mitchelstown near Cork followed the example of the Thomas Cook workers by occupying the premises on August 13, just over one week before the outlet was set to close. Fifteen workers occupied the store, demanding either improved redundancy conditions or the offer of alternative employment with the company, Co-op, at another one of its outlets nationwide. Co-op has already closed down seven stores across Ireland, with plans indicating that several further shutdowns are imminent.

Meanwhile, the two-month-long strike by dockers in Dublin continues, in opposition to attempts by the owner, Peel Group, to replace the current unionized workforce with lower-paid labour. Dockworkers have

received considerable support in the local population, with demonstrations of several hundred a regular occurrence. On August 24, over 300 protesters defied a court injunction by entering the site of the company, Marine Terminals Ltd (MTL), and briefly occupying the control centre. Protesters claimed that MTL had brought in outside labour to break the strike, and there were shouts of "dockers in, scabs out" as the demonstration entered the property.

The unions, who had organized the rally in order to allow workers to let off steam, were unable to prevent the temporary occupation in spite of their best efforts. Union leader Joe O'Flynn called upon MTL to "hand over the facility to a company that will behave within decent business norms."

O'Flynn sought to portray the Peel Group as a "rogue" outfit, who had consistently ignored attempts by the unions to reach a compromise. Reports suggest that Peel is seeking to impose 37 redundancies on the workforce, leaving just 15 dockers to run the terminal. Negotiations with unions have been broken off by the Peel Group, with workers currently being offered only two weeks redundancy pay per year of service.

The threat of strike action by workers at Dublin airport has increased. On August 28, Aer Lingus chief executive Colm Barrington announced that wage reductions for the airline's 3,000 employees were "certain" before the end of the year. This followed an announcement that Aer Lingus had lost over €90 million in the first six months of the year, the worst six-month financial performance in its history.

Barrington also stated that "Aer Lingus has probably got more people than it needs," fuelling speculation that attacks on wages will be combined with layoffs. A stockbroker from Bloxham told the *Irish Times* that a minimum of 800 job cuts would be required, while other estimates have put the figure as high as 1,000. The wage cuts are set to focus on pilots and air crew, with ground staff already having suffered a 17 percent pay cut last year. As Barrington declared ominously, "I hope the over 3,000 employees realise if they are to survive in their jobs, they will have to make changes."

These are only the latest examples of a concerted campaign by employers to make the working class pay for the economic crisis. IBEC, the main Irish employer organisation, earlier this year adopted a policy which calls for an across-the-board wage reduction of 10 percent. In addition, it has supported the massive spending cuts initiated by the government since last autumn's budget, calling for even deeper inroads into spending.

IBEC has also encouraged its members to reduce redundancy payouts to the statutory minimum. Employers are reimbursed for 60 percent of the cost of statutory redundancy from the state, and are determined to reduce additional costs to a minimum.