

Ireland: 300,000 public service workers strike

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Up to 300,000 public service workers in Ireland struck November 24 against proposals by the Irish government to impose devastating spending cuts in the 2010 budget.

Teachers, lecturers, nurses, local authority workers, fire fighters, civil servants all supported the strike. Many schools and government offices are reported to have been picketed. Of the sections of workers involved, only those on emergency and flood relief duty worked normally. Even members of the police force, although prevented by law from striking, were encouraged to attend civilian pickets at police stations and to ignore routine tasks. Prison officers also struck.

The strike underscored the breadth of opposition to plans by the government and the financial aristocracy to take a sledgehammer to vital public services and living standards. Ballots in the run-up to the industrial action had shown overwhelming majorities in support of the strike. Within SIPTU, one of the main public service unions, for example, 85.6 percent of health service workers, 91.6 percent of fire fighters, 79 percent of tertiary education staff and 77 percent of civil servants voted to strike. Similar majorities were recorded in other public service unions, including Unite's 6,000 public service workers.

Yesterday's national strike follows a series of demonstrations and increasingly bitter industrial disputes. Last February, 120,000 workers demonstrated in Dublin against proposals then being implemented for a 7 percent public sector pay "levy". Workers at Waterford Crystal, Boots, Coca Cola, Dublin docks and a number of other employers have struck against closures and layoffs. A one-day general strike planned for March 30 was cancelled at the last moment by the trade unions.

On November 6, demonstrations were held across Ireland. Some 70,000 marched in Dublin, around 15,000 turned out in Cork, 9,000 in Waterford and

6,000 in Galway. Thousands more gathered in Northern Ireland on the same day to protest similar cuts being imposed by the Northern Ireland Assembly and the British government. Demonstrations and rallies were held by the trade unions in Belfast, Derry, Omagh, Armagh, Ballymena, Magherafelt and Newry.

In the republic, the Fianna Fail/Green coalition intends to cut at least €4 billion from public spending, while in the North, the Sinn Fein/Democratic Unionist government intends to deal with a £370 million annual shortfall into £1.6 billion in cuts between 2009 and 2011. The cuts stem directly from the immense bailouts organised by both the Irish and British governments for their financial systems and ruined banks.

The Irish government's National Management Agency (NAMA) "bad bank" will cost the taxpayers immense, as yet still unknown, amounts over the coming years. Last week, Allied Irish Banks announced its estimated portfolio of bad loans to be some €24 billion, of which €10.5 billion is "dross".

Bank of Ireland intends to dump €16 billion into NAMA. The Irish government is seeking to recoup these losses by slashing public spending, principally at the expense of public sector wages. For its part, the British government's gargantuan bailouts are only beginning to have an impact on public spending, including its annual £18 billion subvention to Northern Ireland.

Despite feigning opposition in words to the budget cuts, the trade unions, North and South, have repeatedly made clear that their intention is to impose the cuts. Their only demand is that they be imposed gradually, giving the unions time to manage and dissipate popular opposition.

The head of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), David Begg, was quite explicit. In a letter sent to union members October 21, Begg encouraged people to attend the November 6 demonstration, while

insisting there was a “fairer way to deal with our problems... If we extend recovery over a longer time frame we can ensure important services and supports are maintained.”

Begg’s colleague gave a similar message to November 6 demonstrators in Belfast. Peter Bunting, ICTU deputy leader, having denounced the bank bailouts and sharply increased unemployment, called for a new politics designed to boost local capitalism: “We need more jobs. We need a vibrant private sector. We need more start-ups and we need to create more research and development.”

Despite the categorical opposition to all cuts being expressed by workers in the public and private sector, the unions view the November 24 strike as a means to let off steam and a tool to lever their way back into negotiations with the government.

In a leaked letter, published November 3, Peter McLoone, leader of the IMPACT public service union, wrote to officials, warning, “In my judgment the alternative [to pay cuts] is likely to involve a significant reduction in public service numbers over the next three to four years, with the likelihood that some additional exceptional measures will also be needed in 2010 to deal with the budgetary crisis next year.”

The *Irish Times* on November 12 reported on discussions between civil service union officials and the Irish government over the possibility of imposing €1.3 billion in cuts by reducing overtime, freezing recruitment and extending working hours. No agreement was initially reached. However, SIPTU, in a press release issued November 20, stated that it was “prepared to assist in the reform of the public sector, and are prepared to identify, and deal with, areas where savings can be made.”

In response, on November 20 the Irish Department of Finance released a “vision” document to the trade unions. In addition to further proposals on overtime, premium payments, retirement incentives and longer core working hours, the document proposed wholesale rationalization of public services through mergers, staff cuts, the use of shared services, e-government, and increased productivity. New “targeted exit mechanisms” were also proposed—a euphemism for compulsory redundancy.

Peter McLoone let it be known that the document could form the basis of negotiations, while the ICTU’s

public service committee intends to resume discussion with the government today.



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