

Ireland: Public sector unions agree four-year strike ban

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The agreement between Ireland's public sector trade unions, the government and employers to ban strikes until 2014 gives full expression to the role of the union bureaucracy as the ally of the financial aristocracy and its plundering of public finances.

The agreement, reached March 31 in the offices of Ireland's Labour Relations Commission (LRC), will drastically impact the lives of 300,000 public service workers. It sets down a new marker in the class collaboration practised by the trade union bureaucracies throughout Europe, which are seeking to emulate the "Irish model" in imposing the costs of recession and the financial crisis on the working class.

The proposals include large-scale job cuts, productivity and flexibility provisions aimed at "organisational rationalisation", and the replacement of annual pay increments with merit- and performance-related pay. Finally, "Strikes or other forms of industrial action by trade unions, employees or employers are precluded in respect of any matters covered by this Agreement".

In return for these pledges, the government and the employers have ostensibly agreed that there will be no further pay cuts, and any redundancies will be "voluntary." Even so, 18,000 jobs are immediately at risk, with 6,000 of these in the health service. In truth, these pledges are worthless, since they are "subject to no currently unforeseen budgetary deterioration".

Anticipating fierce opposition from broad sections of workers, Jack O'Connor of the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) said, "Is it better to fight on in the knowledge we're still living in a ruined economy, and that any action we take will be depicted as an attack on the citizens of the country?"

An overtime ban at passport offices has been

suspended by the Civil and Public Services Union. SIPTU and IMPACT, both of whose members are engaged in work-to-rule actions to force the government into talks, are campaigning for acceptance of the agreement. So far, only the teachers' unions—the Association of Secondary School Teachers and the Teachers Union of Ireland—have rejected the deal and encouraged their members to vote against it.

The proposals are worse than the terms offered by the unions during the "social partnership" talks that collapsed in December. Then, the government walked away from a deal offered by the unions that would have cut public spending by €1.3 billion through rationalisations and forced unpaid leave. The government and employers decided they wanted more, rejected the deal, and imposed a new round of welfare and pay cuts. Thereafter, every action by the unions has been geared to re-establishing working relations with the government and employers.

Key to this was the agreement earlier in March by IMPACT to recommend a pact concocted by the Labour Relations Commission entailing 600 job losses at Aer Lingus. This was taken by the government and the employers as an unmistakable indicator of the readiness of the union bureaucracy to do their bidding.

Irish events express in a more finished form than perhaps anywhere else the complete collapse of the trade unions as defensive organisations of the working class.

For some years, this was masked by the specific economic conjuncture within which Ireland found itself during the boom years of the so-called "Celtic Tiger". By means of a host of European Union subsidies and investments from the United States, Irish-based companies were able to take advantage of export opportunities to Europe. The trade unions were central

to the success of this project, since the “social partnership” deals they championed offered employers industrial peace.

For a time, the huge profits made out of the Irish work force came alongside pay increases for sections of workers. Ireland even became a destination for emigrant workers from around the world.

The end of the Celtic Tiger boom came when the advantages offered by Ireland as a production base were outweighed by vastly cheaper labour costs available in Eastern Europe, the Indian subcontinent and China. Thereafter, the Irish economy, including state finances, became increasingly dependent on the country’s financial sector, the speculative returns from which generated immense profits and a huge building bubble.

Most of the toxic loans now being channelled from the ruined Irish banking system into the country’s “bad bank”, the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA), were put together in the years between 2004 and 2008.

Within hours of the LRC agreement, the Irish parliament finally approved the NAMA bailout. The political representatives of the same parasitic elite to whom the unions have pledged their collaboration voted to transfer massive debts onto the public purse, payment to be collected from the working class at the first opportunity. Estimates of the total cost of NAMA are still contested, but some run as high as €100 billion—more than the state’s entire public spending for three years.

Every bank remains in a near ruinous state and is likely to be pumped up with yet more state cash. During the debate on the NAMA bailout, Finance Minister Brian Lenihan announced that the Anglo Irish Bank, which recently announced the biggest loss in Irish history—€12.7 billion—would need an additional €10 billion on top of €8.3 already made available. Irish Nationwide Building Society is due to receive €2.7 billion, AIB €7.4 billion, Bank of Ireland €2.7 billion and EBS a mere €875 million.

This is where the subordination of the Irish working class to the Irish bourgeoisie by the trade unions has ended up.

The period when these bureaucratic shells could dominate the working class is rapidly coming to an end. No appeals to patriotism and the shared interests of the

“Irish people” can hide the fact that, under capitalism, Ireland has been driven to near bankruptcy by a narrow layer of the super-rich. There is no way out of this situation on a purely national basis and without challenging the essential foundations of capitalism.

Objective circumstances have created the basis for the creation of new mass workers’ organisations and a new revolutionary socialist party, tasked with merging the struggles of working people in Ireland together with those of their class brothers and sisters across Europe and internationally.

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