

Student demonstration against cuts attacked by police in Dublin

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Over 40,000 students and young people marched through central Dublin last Wednesday, protesting government attacks on tertiary education. The demonstration, called by the Union of Students of Ireland (USI), came as the Fianna Fail/Green party government announced a further €6 billion in cuts in its 2011 budget.

Suggestions that the budget would include a €3,000 student charge and a further 10 percent cut in the maintenance grant helped swell the numbers of protestors far beyond the organisers' expectations. Testifying to the fears of an entire generation, some 200 buses brought students from institutions all over the Irish republic, including, as well as the main Dublin universities, Letterkenny, Tralee, Limerick and Galway/Mayo Institutes of Technology.

Slogans on placards, both home-made and issued by the organisers, included "Education not Emigration", "Free Education for Everyone" and "Pay My Fees or Pay My Dole."

The demonstration was from all accounts noisy, lively and good humoured. Many young people were going on the first protest of their lives. A small group of demonstrators attempted to occupy the Ministry of Finance, 2,000 more sat down in the road and a few objects were thrown at the government department most responsible for gutting social services on behalf of the Irish and international financial aristocracy. The main body of the march protested their views outside Leinster House, the Irish parliament building, shouting "I am a vote". The USI's protest focuses on a call for students to merely register to vote.

Despite the overwhelmingly peaceful character of the demonstration, the students at the Ministry of Finance were attacked repeatedly and with disproportionate violence by riot police using shields, batons, dogs and

horses. Numerous videos available show frightened and agitated students, sitting harmlessly in the road, surrounded by fully armoured riot police, indiscriminately lashing out at whoever is in range.

Other clips show police horses being ridden straight into crowds of young people, some of who became entangled in the horses' legs. Many demonstrators suffered cuts and bruises. Images of bloody faces were beamed around the world. At least one person was carried away apparently unconscious. Scuffles continued later on St Stephen's Green. A number of complaints have been lodged with the police.

An eyewitness wrote to the *Irish Times*, "The protesters were peaceful and unarmed. They were hemmed in by riot police who then repeatedly and indiscriminately batoned them. Photographers were manhandled by gardaí. A young woman was dragged by her feet along the ground, unable to defend herself."

Despite the clearly orchestrated, and rehearsed, character of the police action, the students' union immediately sided with the authorities—claiming that the violence was the work of a "small minority" of demonstrators. In a statement, the USI, whose leader Gary Redmond it has emerged took part in election campaigns for Fianna Fail, declared that "left-wing" groups were responsible for "destructive and anti-social violence". The USI web site contains no mention whatsoever of the police assault and a ten-minute video does not show it.

The demonstrators have been the target of hysterical media condemnation. The *Examiner* ranted that the students cause had been "jeopardised by a small minority who went out of their way to clash with gardaí", while the *Irish Independent* felt that "the country could do without such violent images winging their way around the world at a time when mistaken or

incomplete perceptions can be dangerous.” The *Irish Times* hosted an exchange on the theme “Are street politics and direct action protests against individuals legitimate in a democracy?”

Although the immediate trigger for the protest was the tuition fee hikes, the depth of the frustrations felt by students is only one aspect of the broadly-felt anger at relentless social cuts. One day after the march, government ministers confirmed that next year’s budget will be cut by €6 billion, €2 billion more than previously announced. The budget is the latest in a series following the financial crash of 2008, which are among the most savage cutbacks in Europe.

Included in the measures reportedly being considered are further reductions in the social welfare budget, education and healthcare, and job losses across the board. The department of health has already cut 5,000 health service jobs, with similar cuts expected in other areas. In the coming weeks, the government will publish a four-year plan designed to return Ireland’s budget deficit to 3 percent of GDP by 2014. Currently at 32 percent of GDP, Ireland’s budget deficit is the worst of any European state. After a €45 billion bank bailout, a figure which could still rise, government borrowing has surpassed 100 percent of GDP.

The government was forced to announce the budget figures early as part of desperate efforts to appease the bond markets. But interest rates on ten-year government bonds still rose for the eighth day in a row to 7.7 percent, a full 5.2 percentage points above the rate for German bonds and a record since the formation of the eurozone.

The government’s four-year plan envisages spending cuts being front loaded, meaning that the first two years will see the deepest reductions. But as Brendan Keenan wrote in *Irish Times*, the effort to reduce the budget deficit is entirely dependent on world economic factors outside the government’s control. According to Keenan, government figures project a growth in Ireland’s economy of 11 percent in the next four years, with the peak year being 2012 when growth of 3.25 percent is expected. However, “Everything—or almost everything—depends on something like these figures being achieved. If they are not, then even €15 billion will not be enough to get the deficit to the promised 3 percent of GDP by 2014.”

Many now see it as inevitable that Ireland will require

external aid from the European Union. Alan McQuaid, chief economist with Bloxham stockbrokers, commented, “Given the continuous upward movement in bond yields we’ve seen in recent weeks, it’s obvious that time is of the essence. This is Ireland’s last chance to impress. Failure to do so will have serious negative consequences.”

The violence and condemnation directed against the student protestors flows from this. Any protest which moves beyond a passive and carefully controlled venting of frustration like that envisioned by the USI and the trade unions can expect to be brutally attacked.

It is not a coincidence that, shortly after the USI protest, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), whose leaders signed a deal earlier this year at Croke Park to ban strikes for four years, called a new demonstration to be held November 27, a few days before the full details of the next budget are due to be released. In calling a “national mobilisation and demonstration”, which is entirely at odds with the basic thrust of ICTU policy supporting the government and the employers, the unions are seeking to retain political control of the working class. Their sole aim is to divert, disperse, pacify and divide Irish workers’ deepening opposition to austerity.



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