

# Social crisis grips Ireland

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The accelerating economic crisis in Ireland is taking a terrible toll on broad layers of workers, particularly the more vulnerable—children, the elderly, those on low incomes and with insecure housing.

Hundreds of thousands of people face privation and suffering as every area of social life comes under intense stress from savage spending cuts and increased unemployment. This is in advance of the measures now being put in place by the Irish elite, the European Union and the International Monetary Fund to implement another major subvention of public funds to the banking system.

Dublin City Coroner's Court heard last week that 81-year-old Ann Cumiskey died in the early hours of the morning when fire broke out in her Dublin house. Ms. Cumiskey lived with her son-in-law, Patrick Gorman, who could no longer afford to pay electricity bills and had removed all the fuses in the house. Ms. Cumiskey appears to have used candles for lighting her hallway and bedroom, one of which is suspected of starting a fire in her bedroom. She was overcome by smoke. Other members of the family suffered burns and broken bones. Mr. Gorman had recently lost his job.

The tragedy points to countless unidentified personal crises that lie behind unemployment figures for the Irish republic, which currently stand at 13.6 percent, up from 4.3 percent in 2005 and 7.6 percent in 2007. The figure for October fell slightly, from 13.8 percent, but this is due to a rapid increase in emigration.

More than 1,250 students are reported to be leaving the country every month. Thousands of mostly younger workers are now once again emigrating in search of a livelihood. Recent press reports included interviews with workers who have travelled as far as South Korea in search of work, along with more traditional destinations such as the United States and Canada.

The seasonally adjusted Live Register, which includes seasonal and part-time workers, stands at

443,000, 24 percent of whom are in Dublin. The largest category of people seeking work is craft workers, which includes the building industry and factory operatives. Some 74,635 are non-Irish nationals, including 40,065 from the European Union. During the years of the building boom, particularly between 2004 and 2008, thousands of east European workers moved to Ireland for work. Many of these are now stranded. Many on the Live Register are young workers; 82,922 are under the age of 25.

Figures from the children's charity Barnardo's suggested that despite claims from the government that the 2009/2010 budget cuts would not affect the poorest, in reality a family wholly reliant on state benefits would have suffered a €31 cut in weekly income over 2010. If the government goes ahead with the floated 5 percent cut to child benefit, that family will lose €13.53 more per week, while a 10 percent cut would cost the same family €45.87.

Many more job losses are imminent, as a result of cuts already in place and those to be announced in the upcoming budget, which is expected to slash at least €6 billion from social spending. Some 20,000 public sector jobs, up from the 13,000 previously stated, are expected to be lost directly because of the new budget, on top of 12,000 jobs that have already been lost this year.

Public sector workers have been vilified in the Irish press, blamed for the economic crisis for which they bear no responsibility whatsoever. In reality, the 300,000 public sector workers provide the most essential social services, which face being gutted, if not dispensed with. For example, hundreds of special needs assistants (SNAs) who provide one-to-one help for children in need of particularly educational support are expected to be targeted. Five percent of the 10,000 SNAs, many on temporary contracts, are expected to be sacked following the government's decision to remove 100 categories of need from the system. Fergus Finlay

of Barnardo's warned there had already been a "huge cull" of SNAs over the last two years. He warned that the constitutional right of children to education was in danger, while further cutbacks would force the most vulnerable children back into mainstream schools.

Cuts will affect services that, even at the height of Ireland's boom, were never at the level offered in many of the most powerful European states. A recent report, "Who Cares", was published by the ombudsman tasked with investigating complaints into government departments. The report concluded that for the last four decades the state had "failed consistently" to meet its legal obligation to provide nursing home care for elderly people under a 1970 Health Act.

The government already conceded in 2004, that tens of thousands of people were illegally charged for care received in public homes. As holders of state medical cards, care should have been free. The ombudsman declined to offer a redress scheme, however, as this would cost "several billion euro"—the sort of sum pumped repeatedly into the banking system by the Ministry of Finance over the last two years.

Current facilities for the elderly are under intense pressure. Navan Alzheimer Day Centre, faced with a €15,000 cut on top of a €19,000 cut last year, looks after 23 people every day, and assists another 22. The centre, like hundreds across the country, will close in six months unless it finds extra funding, imposing a huge additional burden on families and relatives.

Thousands of homeowners and tenants are in an increasingly precarious situation. Morgan Kelly, the economist who earlier this year stated that a state default on debts was a matter of "when not if", wrote in the *Irish Times* November 8 to warn that the next round of the banking crisis would "involve hundreds of thousands of families with mortgages. 100,000 mortgages (one in eight) are already underwater, and things have barely started."

Kelly continued, "People are going to extraordinary lengths—not paying other bills and borrowing heavily from their parents—to meet mortgage repayments, both out of fear of losing their homes and to avoid the stigma of admitting that they are broke."

People are also finding it impossible to buy houses, with up to 80 percent of new mortgage applications being rejected on the basis that applicants had no savings, no job security, a bad credit history, or simply

did not earn enough. This is despite the fact that property prices have dropped 35 percent from their peak in 2006 and monthly repayments are half what they would have been in that year.

Private tenants are being affected, too. Housing charity Threshold reported that the numbers of people physically removed from their homes was worryingly high.

Some 20,000 people sought advice from the charity last year, of which 4,125 cases involved disputes between tenants and landlords over housing deposits. This suggested "landlords don't have the cash to return deposits to compliant tenants."

More tenants were also seeking advice on how to get out of hugely expensive leases as rents become unaffordable, while rent caps on payments to welfare claimants in Dublin was forcing claimants into vermin-infested, unsafe, damp and inadequately heated housing.

Organisations offering free food also reported a dramatic increase in people seeking support. Dublin's Capuchin Friary offers breakfast to the homeless and needy. Even during the boom years, 150 people sought assistance daily. That number has now trebled, with 700 people a day coming in for lunch.



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