

Tens of thousands protest EU-IMF bank bailout in Ireland

Chris Marsden
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Saturday's demonstration by between 50,000 and 100,000 in Dublin against the bailout of banks was massive by Irish standards and in relation to its workforce of 2 million. It was a powerful expression of the determination of workers, young people and students to resist the savage austerity measures being imposed by the Fianna Fail-Green Party coalition as a precondition for an €85 billion package of loans and guarantees from the European Union and the International Monetary Fund.

The pain involved only gets worse. The deal reached with the EU finance ministers late Sunday means Ireland will have to pay a staggering 5.8 percent interest rate on its loan, compared with 5.2 percent for Greece. The Irish State will also funnel €17.5 billion into the coffers of the banks from the National Pension Reserve Fund and other sources. It has been estimated that by 2014 interest payments on the loan will have increased from €2.5 billion to over €8 billion per annum, around one fifth of all tax revenue.

Yet there is a fundamental political dilemma facing those looking to defend themselves from a further 10 percent cut in wages, tens of thousands of job losses, tax hikes and the elimination of social provisions—set to cost families that have already suffered an average €4,000 loss in income an additional €4,000 a year. It found symbolic expression at the rally at the end of the march, where the two main representatives of its organisers, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, were subjected to catcalls and booing that on occasion drowned out their speeches, even over the PA system.

The reaction to David Begg, the ICTU's general secretary, and Jack O'Connor, the leader of Ireland's largest union, SIPTU, was manifestly hostile. But this solicited precious little comment in the mainstream media. The Irish *Sunday Times* noted, "Jack O'Connor, the ICTU president, and David Begg, its General Secretary, were loudly heckled. Angry marchers shouted at O'Connor 'to get off the stage'.

"Amy Brennan, a worker with Carraig Donn knitwear in Athlone, said union officials were earning too much. 'They're not in touch with reality. They've forgotten what

it's like to work for the minimum wage or not much more. They have nothing to say to me' she said."

CNN reported, "While all the protesters opposed the government, not everybody present agreed with the official organisers of the march. 'ICTU are in a partnership with the government in order to quell the public's discontent and dissent,' said Kevin Farrell, a member of the national executive of the Teachers Union of Ireland, who booed Mr Begg. They agree with the government that there should be cuts. The only difference between them and the government is that they want to do it over a longer time. We should be telling the IMF to stick it. The Partnership process [of national wage negotiations between the government, unions and business] has created an Irish Congress of Trade Unions that has forgotten how to negotiate."

On the Internet, however, a number of sources noted the significance of the response accorded to Begg and O'Connor. The Kerry Public Service Workers Alliance, noted, "Business award winner Jack O'Connor and former banker David Begg were roundly heckled and booed by the audience at the GPO as they gave speeches from the podium....

"*Irish Times* correspondent Mary Fitzgerald tweeted that Jack even had 'Surrender Monkey' yelled at him as he bungled his speech.... Begg was on stage a little later and left equally ashen faced."

Politics.i.e. posted a comment, "I was there and I booed as well.... Begg and O'Connor were both responsible by their implications in various boards.... I must say that it's the first time they were booed so loudly. The boos were often higher than their voices over the PA system."

Political World noted, "The booing and whistling of O'Connor and Begg was noticeable on the TV3 5.45 news coverage but curiously absent on the RTE 6.01 coverage. Different locations for their sound recording equipment or some judicious editing?"

The ICTU is immediately responsible for all of the attacks already undertaken by Fianna Fail and will collude in all of those now being planned. Its march, routinely described as

the “last chance” for people to make their opposition known before the emergency budget is passed December 7, was an exercise in duplicity. Like their counterparts internationally, the Irish bureaucrats made a symbolic protest before scurrying off to plot with the government on how to impose the agreement with the EU finance ministers at Brussels.

Begg, O'Connor and their ilk have spent decades—their entire political careers—as bagmen for the bankers and major corporations, suppressing strikes under one tripartite agreement with the employers and the government after another. The latest is Croke Park, signed in response to the onset of the crisis. It promised a no-strike deal and collaboration with the previous €14.5 billion round of cuts, in return for a guarantee not to cut pay further or to introduce compulsory redundancies. It is still considered operational by the ICTU, even as the government prepares to sack 25,000 public sector workers—one in ten of the workforce—and slashes the minimum wage.

Begg is up to his neck in every dirty deal being hatched. He has been a director of the Central Bank since 1995, a governor of the Irish Times Trust, non executive director of Aer Lingus, a member of the National Economic and Social Council (NESC), and of the Advisory Board of Development Co-operation Ireland. He sent the march to assemble before the General Post Office, scene of the battle between Irish Republicans and British troops in the 1916 Easter Rising, only so that the trade union bureaucracy and its apologists could better throw nationalist sand in the faces of the working class.

Thus he declared that the government “must not under any circumstances accede to the terms of this Versailles Treaty,” even as he prepares to sell it.

For his part, O'Connor denounced the government for its “arrogance” in agreeing to a European Stability Fund package marketed as a rescue mission. “We are here to insist that all together we can overcome the problems created by the wealthy elite in this country,” he said.

But O'Connor is one of the wealthy elite. The *Business and Finance* journal recently voted O'Connor “Business person of the month” for advising his members to vote in favour of the Croke Park agreement. It wrote, “Realising the damage that further disruption could cause to Ireland’s reputation abroad, O’Connor said: ‘If you have a long industrial campaign....the interpretation of it externally would be that the Government wasn’t able to honour its commitments and consequently, the credibility of Government bonds would be very much in question’.”

The journal noted that “Unions led thousands in large protests against these austerity measures but since then, objections have taken the form of a low-key campaign of disrupting services sporadically, such as not answering

phones.”

Begg and O'Connor are guilty men, but not merely individual traitors. They are representative of a sizeable and well-paid bureaucracy heading organisations that—in their official role as “social partners”—are dedicated to the suppression of the class struggle on behalf of their paymasters in the corporate HQs and government treasuries in Dublin, London, Berlin, Brussels and Washington.

That is why far more is at stake than simply replacing this or that leader, let alone placing rank-and-file pressure on the existing leaders to fight on behalf of their members. But that is all that is offered by the ICTU’s left critics, such as the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party. They have now pooled their resources in the United Left Alliance to focus on a campaign for a one-day general strike next year and the election of a few left candidates to the Dail (parliament) to put pressure on a possible coalition government of the Labour Party and Fine Gael.

After the main rally, the Socialist Party Member of the European Parliament Joe Higgins called for a 24-hour general strike to be organised by the ICTU so that the disastrous policy of “supping with the IMF” was stopped. For his part, Dun Laoghaire councillor Richard Boyd Barrett of the SWP front, People Before Profit, called on people to “lay siege” to the Dail on Budget day.

This thin gruel of limited trade union action and protest stunts goes nowhere near addressing the fundamental problems now facing workers. Like their brothers and sisters across Europe, working people are trapped in unions that function as frontline police for management and parties, like Labour and Sinn Fein, that wrap themselves in the tricolour in order to conceal their pro-business agenda.

Workers need new organisations dedicated to waging the class struggle against the employers and their representatives, whatever flag they fly, and a party dedicated to the struggle for socialism on a European and international scale.



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