

Irish Republic hit by water crisis

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While the water crisis in Northern Ireland has grabbed headlines across the world, far less attention has been paid to the serious and widespread problems afflicting the Irish Republic.

Over a few days in late December, temperatures rose from below -15° Celsius (5° Fahrenheit) to over 10° Celsius (50° Fahrenheit), after weeks of sub-zero temperatures. The sudden thaw exposed Ireland's decrepit water and sewage infrastructure to intolerable strains, resulting in numerous burst water mains and domestic pipes. Dublin has been badly affected, as have numerous regional towns and rural areas.

By December 25, in addition to tens of thousands of households already cut off since early in the month, in Dublin demand for water exceeded supply by some 50 million litres. Reservoirs ran dry, as their contents poured out through thousands of leaks across the city. The water authorities suspended services between 7 p.m. and 7 a.m. across large areas. South Dublin County Council announced it was shutting its water supply until further notice.

Elsewhere, Kerry County Council cut off supplies to 20,000 people around Tralee. Parts of Limerick suffered disrupted supplies, while Westmeath Council announced it would implement shutoffs without warning to preserve water levels. A number of other local authorities reverted to standpipes inserted into water hydrants for public use.

Four days later, Dublin reduced water supplies to just six hours a day, as it became clear that repairs would take weeks. Water tankers were deployed on the streets while a converted fire engine was pressed into service to fill water tanks in hostels, nursing homes and hospitals. Shortages continued in Cork, where standpipes were set up, and overnight cutoffs were imposed. Carlow reported "major water supply problems". Donegal imposed restrictions. Numerous other areas reported low pressure, and intermittent and

unplanned cuts. Water was delivered by tanker to reservoirs in Navan County.

The situation has somewhat improved, in that night time cutoffs have been reduced and repairs and cutoffs have curtailed demand to below the capacity of the water purification plants. But disruption and reduced pressure is expected to continue in some areas for many months, particularly as the post-holiday start-up of schools and industry will again increase demand.

The immediate cost of repairs to a total of 5,000 reported leaks will cut into budgets set aside for much needed improvements to the weakest 640 kilometres of the 25,000 kilometres of pipes in the national public water network. The Fianna Fail/Green coalition has told local authorities, who run Ireland's water services, that a €300 million capital investment fund should be used instead for emergency repairs. Councils have also been told that the wages of some 2,000 workers taken on over the past weeks will have to be paid out of existing funds.

The crisis is also likely to cause significant job losses, as small businesses, particularly bars and restaurants, will be starved of revenue by the combined impact of a collapse in trade in December, disrupted water supplies and escalating insurance costs.

As in the North, the unusually fluctuating weather has triggered a crisis long in the making. Ireland is not famous for being short of water, but decades of minimal and badly organised investment has left areas of the country dangerously dependent on ancient piping and infrastructure. Some of these date from the period of British colonial rule. During the water crisis, a report by Dublin City Council noted the city's dependence on the Vartry tunnel—a 4 kilometre-long water tunnel running through the Wicklow Mountains and providing 80 million litres of water daily for 150,000 houses in Dublin and Wicklow.

The tunnel, bored through solid rock in 1860, "could

suffer a partial or total collapse at any point in time,” the report said. Consultants hired by the city council had reportedly found a fault in the rock through which the tunnel passed, which meant the “rock-lined tunnel is not stable”. An executive manager with the council, Tom Leahy, breezily told the press that “the good news is that it has been there for 140 years; the bad news is that if it does collapse, it would cause huge disruption and significant supply problems for an extended time.”

The city council plans to bypass the tunnel with a parallel pipe at a cost of between €10 million and €20 million. But, according to Leahy, “2013 is probably the earliest it could be done.”

More recently European Union funding and boom-period tax revenue has been used to upgrade and refurbish water purification and sewage treatment plants, particularly over the last decade. But an indication of the scale of problems can be seen in the government’s own latest Water Services Investment Plan, which calls for €2.8 billion to be spent over the next three years to comply with European Union water and sewage regulations and to cater for a hoped for expansion in business use.

Even under normal conditions, antiquated piping leads to levels of leakage far above European averages. In 2000, a study found 50 percent of Ireland’s water supply was “non-revenue”, i.e., lost through leaks, compared with 24 percent in England and Wales and a mere 10 percent in Germany.

Water quality is variable too. Although urban supplies are said to be generally good, Ireland was condemned by the European Court of Justice in 2002 and again in 2007. “Lack of or inadequate treatment of the urban wastewater discharges of towns and villages is one of the main causes of surface water pollution in Ireland,” it said.

The inadequacies of the water network express the inability of the Irish bourgeoisie, willing tools of world capitalism, to provide modern reliable infrastructure. Over the early decades since independence, the country remained isolated, economically backward and impoverished.

In the years of the “Celtic Tiger” and subsequent property boom, while some resources were diverted to roads, rail and service infrastructure, the great profits extracted from the working class mostly ended up in the accounts of Irish and international banks and US

transnationals.

During the extraordinary, reckless and chaotic property and building boom of 2004-2008, which has ended with Irish banks nationalised, hugely indebted and the Irish state on the brink of debt default, hastily planned office and housing complexes were thrown up regardless of infrastructural and social requirements.

The government has, as in the North, made repeated attempts to use the condition of water services as a pretext to directly open up water services to private profit. In the hysteria following the EU/IMF dictated bailout late in 2010, the government included the introduction of water charges into its National Recovery Plan 2011-2014. The plan states the government intends to “Consider providing commercial opportunities for utility companies through the introduction of water metering.”

The installation of water metres, at an estimated €550 million to be paid for out of the National Pension Reserve Fund, will also be put out to private tender, while €500 million will reportedly be saved by the government annually—or, more correctly, be channelled from the pockets of working people into the coffers of private corporations.



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