

Occupations and lockouts in Ireland

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Tense industrial disputes have erupted in Ireland in recent weeks against job losses. Workers have opposed efforts by foam manufacturer Vita Cortex, the La Senza fashion chain and Lagan Brick to close shops and factories deemed unprofitable and avoid even the most minimal compensation.

Twenty-nine workers at Lagan Brick Ltd., near the village of Kingscourt, County Cavan, were informed December 15 that they would be unemployed and the brick factory in which they work would be closed. The workers, many of whom have worked at the company for more than 20 years, were given no severance pay. A company statement made clear that the workers were being punished for having refused to take a pay cut. Workers told the press that they suspected the company intended to take on agency staff at much reduced rates to replace them and reopen the plant.

The SIPTU union, of which most of the workers are members, clearly had some level of advance knowledge of what was coming. John Regan, a union organiser, told the press that the closure was solely due to management's failure to meet a prior investment commitment. Most workers first heard of their sacking only an hour before the plant closed. In response, they mounted a 24-hour picket, which has been in operation ever since, to prevent building material and equipment being moved from the site. At any time, at least three pickets are onsite, staffing the gate in six-hour shifts.

Lagan Brick workers attended a recent demonstration held by workers from Vita Cortex in Cork, who were sacked the same week. The 32 Vita Cortex workers have been occupying a foam packaging plant for four weeks, following company management's claim that there was no money to pay for agreed redundancy terms.

Vita Cortex is one of a complex web of as many as 29 companies controlled by Tipperary developer Jack Ronan. These include retail parks, a stud farm, a

supermarket, investment properties and a fertiliser business. Ronan's property portfolio is reported to still be worth many millions, despite the collapse of the Irish property market since 2007.

The member of the Irish parliament for Cork, Fianna Fail's Michael McGrath, noted that, in contrast to Ronan's claim that Vita Cortex has been loss making for three years, it made a €366,000 profit in the 16 months to April 2010 and was owed €712,000 by Web Circle Ltd., another of Ronan's companies. Labour's Ciaran Lynch noted that Ronan's companies had set up to ensure that liabilities owed by one were not transferred to the others. Yet, Ronan continues to insist Vita Cortex cannot pay the €1.2 million due to the 32 workers.

The Vita Cortex workers have demonstrated in Cork and Dublin, opened a Facebook page that now has more than 4,000 supporters and appeared on national television. The Dublin demonstration, outside Leinster House, which houses the Irish parliament, drew 400 supporters.

In both the Lagan Brick and Vita Cortex disputes, SIPTU and other leading union officials have issued a flurry of statements and remarks offering "national mobilisations", "full support" and so on. These promises are worthless. There has not been a single day's strike or additional protest called in support of either group of workers to force the companies or government to pay up or reinstate them.

Instead, the SIPTU leadership is working closely with the Labour/Fine Gael government to channel workers towards the Labour Relations Commission (LRC). The LRC machinery was established in 1991 to prevent strikes by entangling workers in a protracted legal process serving the interests of employers, the trade union bureaucracy and the government.

Both Vita Cortex and Lagan Brick workers supported and in turn won support from staff at the La Senza

fashion store in Dublin's Liffey Valley Shopping Centre. Here, again, 114 staff at eight stores were sacked with no notice, deprived of redundancy pay and overtime worked during the Christmas period following La Senza's move to administration.

The La Senza chain, owned by British-based investment company Lion Capital, issued a statement advising workers to seek their "statutory entitlements under the Insolvency Payments scheme".

Lion Capital controls some US\$4 billion worth of investments globally, mostly in retail chains such as All Saints, American Apparel and La Senza. Other companies it controls include Findus frozen foods, Kettle crisis and Nidan, Russia's third largest orange juice supplier. Lion Capital sold La Senza to the Kuwait-based Alshaya Group as part of a "pre-pack" administration designed to close stores in the UK and Ireland that were no longer required and dispense with their staff.

In response, workers from three stores occupied the Liffey Valley outlet on January 9. Shop manager Lynn Higgins-Gill told the press that the workers had repeatedly been lied to by the company. She said, "We have their stock and they are not getting it back. This store made €235,520 over Christmas and this is how we are being treated."

The workers again set up a Facebook page, which drew thousands of fans, and appeared on TV, again drawing widespread support. Faced with this, La Senza's administrators, KPMG, agreed to pay out the small sums involved—about €800 each. Workers received a letter from La Senza, via the Mandate trade union, which, at the time of writing, they are reported to have accepted. This leaves them unemployed and with only a tiny amount of additional cash.

Taken together, the three disputes show that workers are turning to class struggle methods and are seeking to unite against the unrelenting destruction of jobs, social conditions and living standards. The disputes have drawn support directly from other sections of workers in Ireland and internationally. They also reflect a deepening distrust of the union bureaucracy, whose monopoly over communication between workers has decisively been broken by the use of social media. But this has to be translated into a political break with the trade unions and a turn by the working class towards independent industrial and political struggle.



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