

Ireland's Vita Cortex occupation in third month

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The occupation by 32 workers of the former Vita Cortex plant in Cork, Ireland is now well into its third month. On December 16, the workers, most of whom are members of the SIPTU union, occupied the plant after the company refused to pay €1.2 million in redundancy pay they had been promised.

The determined stand taken by the workers has won broad public support across Ireland at a time when many confront the same threat to their jobs and livelihoods due to the austerity policies of the Labour-Fine Gael government.

A recent demonstration in Cork drew over 5,000 supporters, and a Facebook page set up to support the occupation has the backing of over 7,000 members. Regular social evenings and other gatherings are being held by the occupiers, with supporters coming to show their solidarity from all over the country.

The 32 workers had a total of 847 years of service with Vita Cortex behind them. Fully 90 percent are aged between 50 and 65. But they have been given only the statutory minimum of two weeks pay for each year they have been employed by the company.

The funds were paid out of the state's statutory redundancy fund after Vita Cortex owner Jack Ronan claimed he was unable to pay. This derisory sum will do little to support the workers, all of whom confront, at best, the prospect of long-term unemployment, and, at worst, the likelihood of never working again.

An offer of €170,000 from the Vita Cortex directors, less than half the amount still due, was rejected by the workers on March 1. They made clear that nothing less than the €370,000 promised would be sufficient to resolve the dispute.

Ronan, who owns two homes and a stud farm, controls a web of companies, none of which are considered directly liable for the debts of the Cork

division of Vita Cortex.

SIPTU has to date successfully isolated the dispute by confining the workers involved to a campaign to exert moral pressure on the company shareholders and the government. It has refused to call for even minimal industrial action in the workers' defence.

Speaking to the *Irish Times*, SIPTU shop steward Seán Kelleher pledged that the union would “up the pace” and campaign for a work stoppage. In one particularly memorable sentence, he offered ever decreasing prospects to the workers: “We would be hoping for a general stoppage for a day or an hour or even 10 minutes, countrywide, or in Munster. We have yet to decide.”

His promise was made to placate the growing desire to broaden the struggle among the sacked workers. Jim Power, one of the occupying workers and a former lorry driver with 42 years of service with the company, noted, “We have been congratulated on our peaceful and dignified campaign.” He added that the workers were not going to be confined to the canteen of the occupied factory “any more”.

That was more than three weeks ago, and as could be expected, nothing has been done by SIPTU. It has made no appeal to workers at Vita Cortex's other sites, let alone to the working class across Ireland. Vita Cortex operates factories in Athlone, Dublin and Belfast, yet no proposal has been made to call for these workers to walk out in solidarity with their former colleagues in Cork.

SIPTU leader Jack O'Connor claimed during the first week of the occupation that in the new year he would call for the mobilisation of workers nationally to support the Vita Cortex action. No such mobilisation has taken place, and no plans for any such action have

been made.

Instead, the union has promoted the backing of various celebrities with the cynical purpose of concealing its own inaction. SIPTU urged the workers to place their faith in the Labour Relations Commission (LRC), a state-created institution which acts as the enforcer of the interests of Irish and international big business. Last year, the LRC lent its backing to the firing of the entire 1,200 ground staff workforce at national airline Aer Lingus, which allowed the company to impose massive wage cuts and redundancies.

In this case, the LRC announced in early February that it was suspending any further investigation in to the Vita Cortex situation, giving the green light to management not to pay the workers the redundancy money they were due.

The unions subsequently arranged meetings with leading members of the governing Fine Gael-Labour coalition, including Taoiseach (prime minister) Enda Kenny and Tanaiste (deputy prime minister) Eamon Gilmore of the Labour Party. This has only provided the political elite with the opportunity to pose as supporters of the workers' demands, even as they impose savage cuts and job losses nationally.

An appeal from the Vita Cortex workers urging workers to join a struggle to defend their jobs and working conditions would have a significant impact, with unemployment at almost 15 percent and the government implementing the latest round of austerity measures at the behest of the European Union and International Monetary Fund. But the development of any movement against the government and the employers is bitterly opposed by the trade unions, which have loyally backed every attack made on working people since Ireland's economy crashed in 2008, collaborating with both the current government and the previous Fianna Fáil-Green party coalition.

Through the Croke Park agreement the unions are committed to a four-year strike ban, pay freezes and no hiring in the public sector. The result has been a disaster for the Irish working class, with no end in sight.

Now figures within the governing Fine Gael have openly urged that Croke Park be torn up in order to allow the government to make deeper cuts than those previously envisioned. The unions will respond only

with attempts to reassure the government of their readiness to oppose and sabotage any and all working class resistance.



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