

Ireland: Opposition mounts to government-imposed household charge

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A deadline of March 31 is approaching for approximately 1.6 million householders across Ireland to pay a €100 charge on their property to the government. The measure is part of the austerity drive of the Fine Gael-Labour Party coalition to bail out the financial elite at the expense of working people.

Plans for the household charge were outlined in last December's 2012 budget, which saw tax rises and spending cuts totalling €3.8 billion. The charge covers just one year, and it is widely acknowledged that the current €100 level will be increased drastically in the coming period, with the creation of a new property tax as well as the addition of water charges in 2014.

The deadline for the charge could yet be extended, after a high court ruling last Wednesday gave an individual the right to challenge the legislation on the grounds that the government had not published it in Irish Gaelic. The case is due to be heard in two weeks.

Coming on top of billions in cuts to public services and tax increases, there is widespread hostility towards the tax, with many simply unable to afford to make the payment. Only 14 percent of those eligible have registered to pay, with the figure as low as 1 percent of households in certain areas. Local protests have broken out in towns across the country, including demonstrations in more than 40 locations during one weekend at the end of February.

The government has responded with threats and intimidation. Minister for the Environment Phil Hogan, whose department is responsible for administering the charge, announced an agreement with electricity companies to use utility bills as a means to trace individuals who do not pay the tax. Fines of up to €30 will be charged for late payment, as well as interest at 1 percent for every month it takes someone to pay the charge.

Ministers have threatened that further cuts to public services will take place if the charge is not paid. Hogan stated that any shortfall in the collection of funds would have to be made up by local authorities, since the government had "no more money." Hogan told the *Irish Independent*, "The department of finance is not in a position to give me any further resources. Towards the end of the year, we will be cutting services if we don't have the resources from the household charge."

The reality is that the destruction of public services is a deliberate policy of Ireland's ruling elite. In full collaboration with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Union (EU), they have laid waste to state funds over the past four years with the removal of more than €25 billion from government spending through cuts and tax hikes. An EU-IMF bailout of €85 billion to Dublin in 2010 had nothing to do with supporting the Irish people, but was directed towards repaying the gambling debts of the banks.

Anger over this has driven broad layers of the population to take a stand against the charge. Even in small villages, there have been reports of local meetings at which more than half the population has attended. In Kerrykeel, with a population of 200, a local meeting to organise opposition attracted 120.

The leadership of the campaign against household and water taxes (CAHWT), which is dominated by the pseudo-left Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party, is seeking to channel this widespread opposition to the government in to a toothless campaign aimed at winning the support of the trade unions and local councils to block the charge. The CAHWT welcomed a statement from the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) released last month that called upon the government to reverse course on the household charge and replace it with a fairer tax

system. CAHWT stated that it “strongly welcomes this first clear statement from the trade union movement on this tax and calls now for other unions to follow suit, as a reflection of the massive opposition of their membership.”

Recent years have shown working people in Ireland that far from reflecting their anger over the austerity policies of the ruling elite, the trade unions have done all they can to facilitate and implement such measures. No national strike has been called by the unions to oppose the destruction of public services and workers’ jobs. By their adherence to the Croke Park agreement, which includes acceptance of wage freezes, job cuts and a four-year strike ban, the bureaucracy has blocked any attempt by workers to defend their living standards. The SIPTU statement naturally did not call for any practical measures to prevent the imposition of the tax, with union head Jack O’Connor explicitly ruling out support for the campaign of non-payment advocated by CAHWT.

The SP and SWP have used CAHWT as a means to build alliances with sections of the political establishment. Sinn Fein representatives have been involved in organising and speaking at many of the local meetings, and several independent parliamentarians have joined the campaign along with the five SP and SWP MPs who make up the United Left Alliance.

Sinn Fein has shown its mettle in Northern Ireland, where it has collaborated in a coalition the Democratic Unionist Party that has willingly imposed austerity measures in line with those of the British government in London. South of the border, Sinn Fein has made clear that it supports the fundamental aim of reducing Ireland’s budget deficit, but merely asks for a few more years in which to do this.



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