

Ireland: Unions complicit in job cuts at Pfizer

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On June 6, pharmaceutical company Pfizer announced the elimination of 177 jobs at its operations in Cork, Ireland.

The layoffs will take place at two locations, Ringaskiddy and Little Island, and are being justified due to the ending of patents for several of Pfizer's products, which will result in a drop in sales.

The announcement came as Irish unemployment reached a new high of 14.8 percent.

The Pfizer workers who will lose their jobs next year will be confronted with the near certainty of unemployment, as the Fine Gael-Labour coalition continues to intensify austerity measures that have led to the loss of thousands of jobs since 2008. Cork has been hit particularly hard.

The Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU), which represents most of the workforce at the Cork plants, is doing all it can to aid management in imposing the job cuts.

After the 177 layoffs were announced, SIPTU held talks with management and then released a statement which fully accepted the company's position. SIPTU organiser Alan O'Leary stated, "These job losses result from the expiry of the patent on the drug Lipitor, which is produced at the Little Island plant, and dramatically reduced volumes at the Ringaskiddy Plant."

No call was made for the workforce, which approaches 1,000 at the two affected plants and totals 4,000 at eight sites across Ireland, to take any protest action, let alone strike, to defend their positions. Accepting the redundancies as a fait accompli, O'Leary stated, "Pfizer is a key employer in the Cork region and the union will be seeking support from all stakeholders, including the Government, to retain as many jobs as possible at both plants."

SIPTU's inactivity will allow Pfizer to impose cost-cutting at all its Irish locations. The existence of such plans was indicated in remarks by Seamus Fives, site

manager at the Little Island and Ringaskiddy plants. "Much greater competitiveness is required to compete with generic medicines, meaning that the cost of manufacturing must be reduced," he stated. "Within the Pfizer global manufacturing network, Ireland competes with much lower cost manufacturing locations and continuous focus upon competitiveness is critical for the future."

The lack of any defence of the Pfizer workers by SIPTU is in keeping with the role of the trade union bureaucracy in the destruction of jobs since the onset of the economic crisis of 2008. The Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) has blocked any resistance by workers to the onslaught launched against public spending by the previous Fianna Fáil-Green Party government and continued by the current coalition.

Through the Croke Park Agreement, the unions have facilitated a reduction of jobs in the public sector by over 10 percent, with a further 37,000 jobs to go by 2015. The latest figures detailing the savings made under Croke Park were presented to parliament last Wednesday, with fully €1.5 billion (US\$1.9 billion) in cost reductions made since 2010.

Conditions are favourable for an oppositional movement to develop within the working class, and it is for this reason that SIPTU fears calling any action at Pfizer. In the local area there have been several high-profile layoff announcements in recent months, including at international games company Game. Cork was also the city in which 32 Vita Cortex workers launched a five-month occupation of their factory after the company refused to make redundancy payments. Lacking a political perspective and isolated by SIPTU, the occupation was brought to an end last month after 150 days with the workers failing to achieve their very modest demands.

The despicable role of SIPTU at Pfizer has a long pedigree. In 2010, Pfizer revealed a plan to cut its

global workforce by 6,000, with 785 of those job losses coming in Ireland. The reductions saw the closure of nine of Pfizer's 78 global facilities, and came in the wake of the takeover of Wyeth, a market rival. Then as now, no opposition was offered by the unions, who instead worked to ensure that as few of the cuts as possible would take place at its Irish sites. Pfizer's 2010 plan stated that three factories in Ireland, two in Cork and one in Dublin, would close by 2015. Other factory closures were announced in the United States and Puerto Rico.

The global scale of Pfizer's operations means the defence of workers' jobs can only be guided by an internationalist and socialist perspective. But the unions made no call for Pfizer workers in Ireland to build solidarity with their colleagues internationally. Instead, SIPTU offered its services to Pfizer to aid in finding a buyer for the three plants slated for closure, and urged the then Fianna Fáil-Green party government to intervene on the side of the workers. O'Leary stated at the time, "While the news is not very good for people and there is a cloud of uncertainty, I think it is important to say there's a bit of time for this company to sell these plants. We would be calling on the Government to use whatever means it can to support the sale."

The sharp cost-cutting has allowed the company to maintain large profits even as some of its products come off patent. Close to \$3 billion in cuts are being planned from the firm's research budget globally, including the closure of a research site in Britain.

These latest cuts deal a blow to claims embraced by the whole political establishment that the multinational sector will form the basis for Irish economic growth. Pfizer's layoffs are just the first in a broader wave of cuts across the pharmaceuticals sector, which has a large presence in Ireland. Other areas have not been exempt, with Hewlett Packard's 4,000 workforce in Ireland expected to be reduced as part of proposals to cut global staff by 27,000.



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