

# Irish unions make show of opposition to new austerity measures

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The president of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), Eugene McGlone, was booed as he started to speak at last Saturday's anti-austerity march in Dublin.

Up to 10,000 took part in the march organised by the Campaign Against Household and Water Charges, and the Dublin Council of Trade Unions, and supported by the Irish Congress Of Trade Unions and individual unions.

Jack O'Conner, president of SIPTU (Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union), condemned hecklers who shouted "strike" and "traitor" and said it would not be tolerated. O'Conner said it was "a sinister trend which has developed over the recent past and that bears all the hallmarks of fascism." Referring to Sinn Fein and the United Left Alliance, made up of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party, he added, "I want to make it very clear that I am not alleging that either of the organisations approved of, or condoned, fascist activity of this kind. But the fact of the matter is that it is being carried on by people who are either associated with their organisations or elements who are very deliberately masquerading as such for reasons best known to themselves."

The Dublin Council of Trade Unions supported O'Conner and said it would seek to ensure future events were not "marred" by heckling.

The trade union leaders will not tolerate even the token opposition to their betrayals of groups that function as their unabashed cheerleaders. The SWP, for example, claimed in a recent statement, "November 24th should be a turning point in the Irish movement against cuts and austerity."

Sinn Fein dutifully responded to O'Conner by stating, "The party was not involved in the heckling, nor does the party condone such activity."

With the anger of working people growing, there is overall agreement between the Dublin Council of Trade Unions and the United Left Alliance in the Dail (parliament) that every campaign and protest march be safely confined within the argument for regulating capitalism.

General secretary of the ICTU David Begg has asked the Fine Gael/Labour coalition government to freeze all austerity measures "for at least 12 months", in order to stimulate growth and create new jobs.

The SWP has called for a one-day strike. But as a member of parliament, Richard Boyd Barrett of the SWP has met the troika—the European Union (EU), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and European Central Bank (ECB)—on a regular basis for discussions on the crippling austerity measures imposed by the government. Everything for the SWP rests on taking up the "Icelandic model", which it argues proves that "Whether governments are of the centre left or centre right they are forced to create the conditions for capital to accumulate. But even within these constraints there is still room for manoeuvre as the Icelandic example radically reveals."

Prior to a budget that will implement a further €3.5 billion of austerity measures, the coalition has in fact announced a renewed offensive against working people with plans released last week to renegotiate the Croke Park Agreement with the ICTU and the employers. A statement declared that the current no-strike agreement, finalised between the state, trade unions and employers in 2010, would not provide the necessary savings to reduce the budget deficit by 2015.

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform declared, "The Government considers if the public service pay and pensions bill is to make the necessary contribution to the consolidation in expenditure that

will be necessary up to 2015, a new deal, setting out a new agenda for change and productivity, is necessary. The Government intends that any deal would build on the changes agreed and the industrial relations framework established under the Croke Park Agreement.”

The agreement has already enabled public expenditure to be slashed by at least €1.5 billion each year since 2010, which has led to a sharp decline in workers’ living standards. The unions agreed to a strike ban, and to a hiring freeze that has helped eliminate 37,000 public sector jobs. Ireland is the country that has seen one of the largest declines in unit labour costs, which have fallen by more than 6 percent since the onset of the crisis.

The ruling elite are urging that cuts go much further. The *Irish Independent* editorialised in response to the announcement of new talks: “Present pay levels are unaffordable and should never have been agreed in the first place. It may not be possible to reverse them fully, but they must be consigned to history.”

Austerity measures totalling €25 billion euros since 2008 have exacerbated the economic crisis. A government report released on November 14 on its medium-term projections cut its forecast for growth in 2013 from 2.2 percent to 1.5 percent. This followed projections from the European Commission on November 7 that the economy would expand by only 1.1 percent next year. The government report acknowledged that unemployment will remain at around 14 percent in 2014.

Moody’s commented that it was likely that further support would be required to avert state bankruptcy after the €85 billion bailout from the EU, IMF and ECB expires in autumn 2013. Austerity is the inevitable price.

The *Financial Times* reported this month that the debt-to-GDP ratio could reach a high of 121 percent in the coming years. If a deal is not struck between Dublin and the troika on debt restructuring, commentators have warned it could rise to 150 percent of GDP.

According to troika targets, Ireland’s health budget will overrun by at least €500 million by the end of the year. This is in spite of emergency cuts totalling €250 million unveiled in September.

By agreeing to participate in a fresh round of talks, the trade unions have shown once again their

determination to impose the full burden of the crisis on to working people. The successor to Croke Park will seek to slash at least another €1 billion from public sector budgets. Spokesman for the ICTU Bernard Harbor declared, “What’s clear, or what the Government is saying is now clear, is that there’s a bigger hole to fill now than we expected when we went into this process. So I think unions accept that that problem exists.”

“We hear what the minister says when he says that he’ll be looking for savings in the pay bill to help get over that problem, and obviously the general attitude is that it’s much better to be negotiating about how that will happen rather than have payroll changes imposed upon our members,” he continued.

The Dublin Council of Trade Unions had called for workers to join a march that would “send a message” to the government ahead of the budget on December 5. But the real message being sent is that voiced by Harbor.

A genuine opposition movement can develop only to the extent that working people break organisationally and politically from the unions and adopt a socialist perspective to unify their struggles with their class brothers and sisters across Europe—all of whom confront an assault on their living standards by the ruling class.



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