

Deadly human cost of Ireland's austerity measures

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Billions of euros in social spending cuts are having tragic consequences for working people in Ireland, while demonstrating the callous indifference of the political establishment to the widespread misery created by its policies.

Earlier this month, the bodies of John Glennon, age 67, and Debbie McEvoy, age 63, were found in a Dublin apartment. They had frozen to death as a result of the cold temperatures. A post-mortem confirmed that both had died from hypothermia.

Investigations quickly revealed that the flat, located in a sheltered housing complex, had no heating system. The energy firm Bord Gais released a statement confirming that Glennon's gas supply was cut off in 2007.

Several weeks earlier, a homeless man was found frozen to death in the entrance to a Tesco supermarket in the town of Wicklow. Paul Doyle, 33, had been sleeping rough for over a year while on a waiting list for supported accommodation.

Commenting on his fate, a support worker at a homeless charity based in the town said, "He was a very nice man who was just caught up with all the issues that come with being homeless. It's so tragic. He'll be sorely missed by everyone at the centre."

More than five years after the outbreak of the economic crisis and the launching of an austerity drive that is fully embraced by all sections of the Irish ruling elite, broad layers of the population are no longer able to obtain many of the basic necessities of life.

There has been a sharp rise in male suicides. A recent report noted that 525 suicides were recorded in 2011, of which almost a third, 165, were by young men. The *Irish Sun* wrote, "The recent spike in suicide rates among young males in both Northern Ireland and the Republic coincides with the economic downturn and

increasing levels of unemployment."

Unemployment is currently pushing 15 percent and will rise further as the government is negotiating with the trade unions in order to secure redundancies in the public sector. Moreover, the economic situation shows no signs of improving, prompting the European Union (EU) to warn in its latest report on Ireland's progress under its bailout programme that austerity measures will have to be intensified.

The €85 billion package agreed with the troika—the EU, European Central Bank (ECB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2010—has allowed the financial elite to amass vast wealth at the expense of working people.

The cuts begun by the Fianna Fáil-Green Party government and continued by the current Labour-Fine Gael coalition have forced many into poverty. Key services upon which the most vulnerable sections of the population rely have been eliminated or cut to the bone.

A survey by the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN), the organisation for primary school head teachers, showed that one in five teachers had witnessed school children going without food. The same study pointed out a rise in violent behaviour and depression among school children as families struggle under mounting financial burdens.

Healthcare has suffered particularly harsh budget reductions. Deteriorating care is compounding long-standing health inequalities. Figures from the Irish Cancer Society suggest that cancer rates amongst those living in poverty are twice as high as among more affluent layers.

Last year, with the health budget heading towards an "overspend" according to troika targets, health minister James Riley unveiled an emergency cuts package of €250 million on top of the reductions made in the 2012

budget. At the time, estimates suggested that a further €1 billion, or 8 percent of the overall health budget, would need to be eliminated by 2015.

These steps did nothing to satisfy the demands of the financial elite. The latest EU assessment of Ireland's bailout programme continues to put emphasis on the need to slash health spending, especially the wages paid to health workers.

The government, in collaboration with the trade unions, will oblige. Current negotiations on public sector "reform" have suggested that 40 percent of all cuts in a new version of the present Croke Park agreement between government, employers and unions, totalling more than €400 million over three years, will take place in the health sector. This will be part of a plan to save a further €1 billion by 2015, on top of the estimated €6 billion in austerity measures already scheduled for the 2014 and 2015 budgets.

To grasp the impact of these figures, it is necessary to keep in mind Ireland's small population of 4.5 million.

The blueprint for Ireland's public services is Greece, where the troika, with the full support of the Greek political establishment, have imposed devastating social cuts to pay for the bailout of the financial elite. Basic services such as healthcare, education and social support are no longer available to whole sections of the population, producing a re-emergence of preventable diseases and unnecessary deaths. Athens increasingly resembles a city in the third world, with people relying on charities or non-governmental aid organisations for their daily needs.

Ireland's health system and social services are already approaching the breaking point. The *Irish Herald* noted that some junior doctors in hospitals across the country were working up to 71 hours per week, sometimes for 36 hours on one shift. This was provoking severe exhaustion, stress, feelings of depression and even suicide, with a resulting detrimental impact on patient care.

Dr. Anthony O'Connor told the *Herald* that two doctors he had formerly taught had been driven to suicide by the working conditions. There was a "silent epidemic of undiagnosed, untreated depression amongst our colleagues," he stated.

O'Connor explained the impact of working under such conditions for him personally, commenting on the aftermath of one particularly stressful shift, "Luckily I

never felt suicidal, but I remember that morning thinking it might be nice if I was involved in a medium-sized accident where I broke a leg or an arm to get me out of call for a few weeks."



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