

Irish unions support government austerity

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Having negotiated a further €1 billion (US\$1.3 billion) cut in public sector pay with the Labour-Fine Gael coalition in February, Ireland's trade unions are seeking to implement the agreement against strong resistance from public sector workers.

The three-year deal proposes pay cuts and a reduction of the public sector workforce, enforced by the continuing application of a no-strike "Croke Park" agreement between the government and unions first adopted in 2010. The working week will be extended, pay increments frozen, and overtime and weekend working pay rates cut sharply or done away with entirely. Measures presented as the "redeployment" of workers will facilitate redundancies in several areas.

These are the latest stage in the concerted drive by the Irish bourgeoisie to make working people pay for the economic crisis that broke out in 2008. In collaboration with Dublin's lenders in the troika of the European Union (EU), European Central Bank (ECB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), €28.5 billion (US\$37.4 billion) of austerity measures have been implemented to date, a figure that approaches 20 percent of the country's GDP.

The renewal of the no-strike agreement with the unions was insisted upon by the troika, which has been pressing for an intensification of austerity in order to secure Dublin's return to the debt markets later this year. These policies have only deepened the crisis of the Irish economy, and there are mounting fears that a renewed financial collapse could take place as the banks struggle to deal with high debt levels.

Government officials have sought to blackmail workers with threats of deeper cuts if the agreement is not passed. Public Expenditure Minister Brendan Howlin declared that an across-the-board pay cut of 7 percent would be implemented if the package were voted down, while Junior Finance Minister Brian Hayes stated that "everything will be on the table" if

Croke Park II is opposed.

Under these conditions, the unions are doing all they can to sell the austerity measures to their members and prevent the emergence of any struggle against the ruling elite.

The various public sector unions in the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) are currently balloting their memberships on the new agreement, with final results due on April 17.

Writing in the *Irish Independent*, John Downing noted that "there is no great confidence in government circles that Croke Park II will pass." Pointing out that nurses, doctors, police and teachers may all reject the deal, he warned that "such a grouping could pack a considerable social and political punch."

The main task of the union bureaucracy is to prevent this eventuality. Impact, the largest union with more than 60,000 members, recommended a yes vote on the deal. Despite acknowledging that it was "the most challenging proposition put to public servants in living memory", it argued that there was no basis for achieving a better deal if workers rejected it.

Bernard Harbor, the lead negotiator for the Public Services Committee of the ICTU with the government, published a piece in the *Irish Times* in which he bluntly summed up the role of the unions as a mechanism to police workers while the cuts are imposed. Denying any possibility of resisting the austerity drive, he wrote:

"Public servants voting on new Croke Park proposals face both an insurmountable challenge and a choice. The insurmountable challenge is called €1 billion. That's the sum of additional savings that, one way or another, the Government will extract from the public service pay and pensions bill over the next three years. The choice is whether or not they will have the protection of an agreement—with clauses that rule out compulsory redundancies, avoid pay cuts for most, restrict changes to working conditions, and establish

procedures and protections on redeployment—while that €1 billion is extracted.”

In other words, the choice for workers, according to the bureaucracy, is whether they want austerity to be imposed by the trade unions or directly by the government.

However, the trade union bureaucracy is painfully aware that social tensions are rising and that the outbreak of mass struggles is inevitable. Last month, ICTU head David Begg warned in an interview with Britain’s *Daily Telegraph* that Ireland was approaching a “tipping point” after which widespread social unrest could emerge.

With this in mind, several unions have sought to strike a more militant pose, claiming that they will defy the vote of the ICTU’s public services committee if it agrees to the deal. Faced with overwhelming rejection of the deal by members, the Teachers’ Union of Ireland (TUI) executive presented an emergency motion to its congress on April 1 calling on the union to reject a yes vote by the committee, and three days later a similar motion was presented to the conference of the Irish Medical Organisation (IMO).

Neither union has advanced any viable perspective for working people to reject the deal. The IMO said it would consider industrial action as a “last resort” if negotiations with the government could not reach an alternative plan, while the TUI vowed only to take such action if the government attempted to implement the cuts unilaterally.

The TUI discussed at its congress on April 1 the possibility of breaking from the ICTU if the current deal is accepted on April 17.

Four unions that walked out of talks with government before a deal was reached, the IMO, Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, Unite and the Commercial Public Services Union (CPSU), have claimed to be leading a national campaign for a no vote. In reality, the main focus of their activity is to apply pressure to Labour Party backbenchers to oppose the government’s stance. This comes at a time when support for Labour has fallen dramatically, as growing numbers of people recognise it as a right-wing party, fully committed to imposing austerity. Concerns are mounting within the party that it could be virtually wiped out at the next election.

At no point have any of these unions called for a

united struggle of workers against the austerity drive of the ruling elite, which is the only means through which the working class can challenge the attacks on their living standards and threats of ever-deeper cuts. As an *Irish Times* article noted, the focus would instead be to split workers along sectional lines. The main demand of these four unions on the Labour parliamentarians would be for them to “accept the outcome of ballots where members of individual unions vote to reject the proposed new accord.” This would then create the conditions for these individual unions to pressure the government in new negotiations for a few minor modifications to the terms of the agreement.

Genuine opposition to the latest round of austerity measures contained in the Croke Park II proposals must begin with a complete break from the trade unions, which have acted as willing accomplices of governments of all political stripes since the onset of the economic crisis. A new perspective is required, one based on the adoption of a socialist and internationalist programme, to take forward the struggle for decent-paying jobs for all in opposition to the demands of the ruling class for ever deeper cuts.



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