

Irish unions prepared to enforce new round of austerity

Jordan Shilton
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The Labour-Fine Gael coalition in Dublin is to adopt legislation that unilaterally imposes pay cuts and attacks on working conditions for public sector workers. This has been accepted without protest by the trade unions.

The Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (FEMPI) regulations came into force at the beginning of July and were part of the government's drive to impose a new three-year pay agreement on the public sector. This was to replace the Croke Park Agreement negotiated in 2010 with the unions, which resulted in 10 percent of all public sector jobs being eliminated, pay freezes and a no-strike pledge. Croke Park was not due to expire until 2014, but Ireland's economic position has worsened to such an extent that deeper cuts are now considered essential.

The new Haddington Road Agreement will impose a further €1 billion in savings by 2015. This will be accompanied by a three-year pay freeze for all and pay cuts for significant numbers of workers, a "redeployment" scheme that will lead to redundancies, cuts to overtime pay and once again a no-strike agreement from the unions.

Despite overwhelming opposition to these measures during the first round of balloting in April, the unions refused to organise so much as a protest against the proposals. They entered a new round of talks on a union-by-union basis, allowing the government to go on the offensive.

The draconian legislation now in force applies not only to the current agreement, but also to any future pay negotiation in which the government is involved. It prepares the way for additional rounds of wage cutting, given that the government has admitted it has plans in place to continue with austerity until at least 2020. More than €30 billion of cuts have already been

enforced.

Aware that the extension of such policies will provoke mass opposition among the population, the ruling class is implementing legislation to facilitate the enforcement of its demands by means of authoritarian diktat.

The provisions adopted by the government are in line with a turn to ever more openly repressive measures by governments across Europe. The most extreme example of this is in Greece, where the government has slashed wages and attacked the conditions of seamen, transport workers, teachers and other sections of workers using the army and other emergency powers including threats of prison sentences and the loss of jobs.

The Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU), one of the largest public sector unions, initially vowed that if legislation were imposed, it would ballot for strike action. At its annual conference on July 4, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) claimed to be preparing a "vigorous and robust" campaign against the legislation. An emergency motion was supported unanimously to this effect. Shea Cody, head of the largest public sector union Impact, declared that workers had a feeling of "righteous indignation" towards the government for its repeated budget cutting.

This was radical rhetoric to cover the backs of the bureaucracy's betrayal of public sector workers. By the time the motion was passed, most unions had indicated their support for Haddington Road, and none had called for strike action or other protests.

The complicity of the unions was summed up by Unite leader Jimmy Kelly. Announcing his union's decision to support the deal late last month, he stated pathetically, "Our priority is to protect our members' interests in light of the threatened application of the FEMPI legislation. It is apparent from the legal advice

which Unite has received that our members would be seriously disadvantaged if we did not sign up to the Haddington Road proposals.”

The only issue for the unions is to maintain their position as government advisors in the implementation of devastating austerity. Their criticism of the emergency measures is that they enable the government to attack the pay and conditions of working people independently, without consulting the unions and using their apparatus to enforce budget-cutting against the resistance of working people. Or, as Kelly put it, the government’s approach was failing to “promote real reform in our public sector.”

The greatest fear of the union heads is that without their involvement, the ruling class will not be able to control the anger building up in the working class to the savage cuts being imposed. In March, ICTU chief David Begg warned that the social attacks were leading to a situation in which a “tipping point” would be reached, provoking widespread social unrest.

To avert this, the unions are urging a return to collective bargaining. In his speech at last month’s ICTU conference in Belfast, Begg stated that achieving “free collective bargaining” was one of his three main goals over the next few years. In addition, he intends to present a new economic plan for Ireland, to be worked out in conjunction with the Nevin Institute. This trade union-funded research institution calls for the government to initiate “investment-led” programmes to supposedly kick-start the economy and implement national regulation.

Newly elected ICTU president John Douglas claimed, “If we could mobilise 800,000 trade union members and their families to vote for progressive political parties, it is likely that we would not be facing austerity policies North and South. What is also clear is that if we could mobilise the political muscle of the trade union movement, we would today already enjoy free collective bargaining and our public sector members would not have the financial emergency measures in the public interest bill 2013 hanging over their heads.”

This statement is full of dishonesty and outright lies. Douglas is not able to name the “progressive political parties” to whom workers should turn, since the entire political establishment north and south of the border is fully behind the austerity drive, differing only on the best means by which this can be enforced. Secondly,

his declaration that collective bargaining would remove the need for emergency legislation is a tacit admission that the unions would ensure through this procedure that the necessary savings would be generated to avoid the need for unilateral pay cuts.

This has been the role of the union bureaucracy in Ireland for decades, since collective bargaining arrangements were first established in the late 1980s. During the years of economic boom, they maintained strict controls on workers’ wages so that the proceeds of Ireland’s “Celtic Tiger” economy flowed overwhelmingly to the richest layers in society.

With the onset of the global economic crisis, the unions have blocked any attempt by working people to defend their living standards and betrayed those struggles that have emerged. When the government threatened to move away from collective bargaining, the unions signed up to Croke Park, which played a major part in the destruction of workers’ living standards that has taken place since 2008.



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