

Irish Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Party boost trade unions and austerity

Jordan Shilton
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Emergency legislation that came into force in July permits the Irish government to unilaterally change the pay and working conditions of all public sector workers. These new anti-democratic powers, which follow those implemented by the Greek and Spanish governments to impose the dictates of the financial elite, have been accepted without protest by the trade unions. The powers were accompanied by €1 billion (US\$1.3 billion) in further cuts to the pay and benefits of public sector workers in the Haddington Road Agreement (HRA).

The intensification of austerity comes as Ireland's economic position continues to deteriorate. In the first quarter of 2013, state debt as a percentage of GDP rose sharply, and government officials have acknowledged that further financial support will be required for Dublin after its formal bailout programme with the troika ends at the end of this year. Fine Gael finance minister Michael Noonan has indicated that credit for a further 12 months will be sought, and has let it be known that he is currently working to produce a detailed plan containing austerity measures to be imposed over the next seven years.

The trade unions have been fully complicit in implementing austerity since the onset of the crisis. But their ability to maintain control over the growing opposition within the working class is increasingly being challenged. This is clear in the first round of voting on the new public sector pay deal in April, where workers overwhelmingly rejected the cuts package in spite of the unions' support for it, and in the recent rejection of attacks on pay and working conditions at Dublin Bus, where workers voted down the union-brokered deal.

Ireland's pseudo-left groups are stepping forward to prevent workers from decisively breaking with the

trade unions by promoting the illusion that these organisations are capable of resisting the onslaught of the ruling elite. The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (SP) continue to insist that the bureaucracy can be pressured to fight for better conditions for working people.

Central to this is their assertion that only the trade union leaders are to blame, while the organisations themselves still offer a viable means to defend workers' interests. Thus, Socialist Party leader Joe Higgins declared in parliament when the emergency legislation was introduced, "Those trade union members and activists opposing Croke Park and Haddington Road have to continue their campaign beyond these ballots to democratically unseat these leaders and replace them with genuine activists who will draw a line under the succession of retreats we have seen from the trade union movement since the crisis began and make a stand against austerity."

Higgins's presentation of the events of the past five years is false. The trade unions have not been "retreating". They have played the lead role in the implementation of the austerity measures dictated by the "troika"—the European Union, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund—and implemented by successive governments.

In 2010, the unions committed to a four-year strike ban as part of a deal that has seen the elimination of 10 percent of the public sector workforce.

The "activists" to whom Higgins refers have been involved in the betrayal of struggles by working people, and have played their role in negotiating austerity with the government. In an earlier statement, while talks were ongoing over the terms of the Haddington Road deal, Higgins hailed the decision of four unions to walk out of talks: Unite, the Civil Public and Services Union

(CPSU), the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation and the Irish Medical Organisation. Higgins and the SP declared this was the start of a new fight back against the government and austerity.

Nothing is further from the truth. Notwithstanding radical rhetoric about potential strikes and protests in the immediate aftermath of the finalisation of Haddington Road, the unions undertook no action to oppose the authoritarian powers of the government. By the end of June, the CPSU released a statement declaring, “The Executive Committee resolved to work on setting out a ‘road map’ for the union to protect its members within the HRA by not allowing management to go beyond its provisions. In particular Head Office will now begin work on advising members on how to get the best they can from the terms of the agreement.”

In other words, the union is committed to ensure that management stick to its targets under the agreement, including the slashing of €1 billion over the next two years, and that the workers are kept quiet while this takes place.

Unite was even more brazen. At a policy conference in June where a campaign calling for increased pay for its members was discussed, regional secretary Jimmy Kelly blustered, “Where we have strength within the different sectors of the economy we are going to be backing up that [the pay claim] with what we see as the appropriate action to defend workers first of all, to defend workers’ rights and improve and increase wages. That has to be the agenda. We have had too many years of the opposite happening, wages being cut, wages being frozen. That has to stop.”

Less than a month later, Unite’s leadership had determined that “appropriate action” meant the full acceptance of government austerity and the newly imposed emergency measures. Announcing the result of Unite’s ballot on the deal, which was above all a reflection of the lack of confidence of the workers in the union to organise any viable opposition, Kelly justified his acceptance of the cuts by claiming that union members would be “seriously disadvantaged” if the government’s austerity was opposed.

Unite has nonetheless been hailed by the SP for its decision to temporarily suspend its annual donation to the Labour Party of €30,000. This manoeuvre is aimed at urging the junior coalition partner to “do the right thing”, as Kelly put it, and change course. After almost

three years in which Labour has overseen multibillion-euro austerity packages and led the attacks in the public sector, such an approach is deliberately calculated to spread illusions among working people about the possibility of pressurising Labour to the left.

The SWP similarly is trying to provide a left cover for the bureaucracy. In the same week as Unite announced its acceptance of the HRA, the SWP promoted a joint “day of action” led by Unite, under the slogan “pay the workers! Jail the bankers!”

This strategy is in keeping with a broader orientation by the SWP, aimed at promoting a joint campaign with the trade union bureaucracy to pressure the government, in the lead-up to next year’s budget due in October.

The party is calling for a “people’s assembly” on September 18 aimed at building the “broadest possible coalition” with unions that have led the way in the destruction of the living standards of Irish workers and ex-Labour party officials. As SWP leader Richard Boyd Barrett claimed recently, “The onus is on the left independent, socialist and former Labour TD’s [Members of parliament] to get their act together and create a new campaigning left political force that will offer a real alternative for working people, the unemployed, those in mortgage distress and the vulnerable in our society.”

Workers seeking to genuinely oppose the austerity measures of the ruling elite must reject all such illusions in the trade union bureaucracy and the Labour Party promoted by the pseudo-left organisations, which have themselves been fully integrated into the structures of bourgeois politics. The turn must be to the construction of a new party that represents the independent political interests of working people, on the basis of an internationalist and socialist programme.



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