Strikes and protests break out in Ireland despite sabotage by trade unions

Jordan Shilton
5 October 2013

As the Fine Gael/Labour coalition prepares another austerity budget in Dublin, protest actions and strikes have broken out among sections of workers.

On September 22, teachers organised in the Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI) announced their rejection of the Haddington Road Agreement, a plan negotiated with the unions to impose €1 billion in budget cuts in the next two years.

In the first use of the emergency powers granted to the state during the negotiations over the Haddington Road deal, teachers in the ASTI will have the cuts imposed upon them unilaterally. In addition, Education Minister Ruairi Quinn threatened them with redundancies if they continued with their opposition to the government's cost-cutting programme.

The ASTI's 17,000 members began a work to rule on Wednesday, which involves refusing to attend meetings out of school hours for parents, withholding substitute cover for absent teachers, and refusing to complete administrative tasks. Union officials, anxious to prevent an escalation in the struggle, have threatened the government that strike action may be taken in future if they remain unwilling to enter negotiations with the ASTI.

Government officials, including Prime Minister Enda Kenny, have ruled out any talks on the deal.

Meanwhile, the dispute over long working hours in the health sector for doctors is ongoing. The Irish Medical Organisation (IMO) called off the first day of action planned for September 25, but was forced to set a new date for the one-day strike on October 8. This followed the collapse of talks with the Health Service Executive, which the IMO blamed for failing to listen to its concerns.

Doctors voted overwhelmingly for strike action to oppose working patterns that see some working up to 100 hours per week. Shifts of 24 hours are the norm at many hospitals.

The main demands of the union were for an end to 24-hour shifts and an introduction of the European Working Directive, which forbids a working week of more than 48 hours.

Strike action could also be taken at the state energy firm ESB, following an announcement on September 22 that workers were to be balloted by the Services Industrial Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) and Unite. The dispute relates to a €1.6 billion black hole in the company's pension scheme, and the decision of management to change the scheme from a defined-benefit to a defined-contribution plan.

Management refused to acknowledge any liability for any decrease in the value of the pension fund, which has suffered over recent years due to underfunding from the company and the economic crisis. The unions involved in the ballot indicated that strikes could go ahead in early November, and that power supplies would be disrupted, as the action would involve all workers at the company.

These attacks on workers are rooted in the economic crisis, which has devastated Ireland since 2008, and the deliberate policy of the ruling elite, which has sought to shift the full burden of the bailout of the banks on to the backs of working people. Education and health have been two of the areas of public spending most affected by the more than €30 billion cuts enacted by successive governments—a figure that equates to approximately 20 percent of the Irish economy.

In 2012, an emergency health budget was rushed through parliament on top of the cuts announced in the main budget, after it emerged that the government would miss the targets set down by the European Union to cut spending. A further €500 million was cut. From

© World Socialist Web Site

2012 to 2015, fully 8 percent of total health spending is to be eliminated.

Cuts to education have seen the starting salaries for teachers drop sharply and schools starved of resources. Studies have been published revealing that teachers have witnessed a massive rise in the number of their pupils coming to school malnourished or in a poor state of mental or physical well-being.

The next round of attacks to be unveiled by Finance Minister Michael Noonan on October 15 in the 2014 budget will intensify the destruction of what is left of public services. Up to €3.1 billion of spending cuts and tax hikes are being sought.

The sole reason for the lack of strikes and protests by workers in the face of this onslaught has been the role played by the trade union bureaucracy, which has collaborated fully with government policy. In 2010, they all signed up to the Croke Park Agreement, under which the public sector workforce was cut by 10 percent while the unions imposed a strike ban. The signatories included the ASTI, the IMO, the SIPTU and Unite, none of whom did anything to defend their members from the devastating consequences of government austerity.

They have felt compelled to call strikes now in the face of the mounting anger among their members at their repeated betrayals. The first ballot on the new public sector pay agreement was decisively repudiated by a large majority of teachers, nurses, doctors and other public servants. Even after the bureaucracy managed to force through the Haddington Road Agreement at the second time of asking, with threats of the unilateral implementation of cuts under the state's emergency powers, which the unions helped implement, teachers in the ASTI maintained their opposition to the deal.

The ASTI leadership is now pursuing a deliberate policy of isolating the teachers. They concluded an agreement with the Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI), which also represents some secondary school teachers, to prevent teachers from changing their union affiliation. The agreement prevents any members of the TUI, which has already accepted Haddington Road, from joining the strike, and ASTI members from leaving to join another union. Not a single appeal has been made by the ASTI to other teachers or school staff, students or their parents, all of whom confront the same attacks on their jobs and livelihoods.

A similar approach has been adopted by the IMO towards the doctors' strike. In spite of the drastic cuts to health services that affect all health care workers, the IMO has sought to limit the dispute to the single issue of overtime for doctors. The union's main aim has been the restarting of negotiations with the Health Service Executive, and it has reassured the government that after its day of action on October 8, subsequent protests will be confined to individual hospitals.

The union bureaucracy is determined to block the development of a movement within the working class that challenges the government and its vicious social attacks. They are fully integrated into the structures of the state and have proven willing accomplices in the attacks on working people since the onset of the crisis. They have not raised a word of protest at the expansion of authoritarian state powers that are being used to impose the demands of the ruling elite on working people.

Any genuine struggle against the destruction of wages, working conditions and social services, whether led by doctors, teachers or any other section of workers, can only go forward in a decisive political break with these organisations, and the formation of independent strike committees to coordinate their struggles. The political basis for such a turn is a socialist and internationalist programme.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site