

Irish pensioners protest in Dublin

Dermot Quinn
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On Tuesday, thousands of mainly elderly people protested outside the Irish Dail (parliament) demanding a reversal of the savage austerity cuts introduced the previous week as part of the government's 2014 budget.

The protest was organised by the Irish Senior Citizens Parliament and affiliated organisations, and estimates as to the number of participants ranged from 3,000 to 7,000.

Elderly people who were targeted in the government's budget travelled from all parts of the country and gathered in Dublin city centre shouting, "We want justice" and called on the Fine Gael/Labour government to resign. Buses took groups from Cork, Ireland's second major city, and from smaller towns and villages on the west coast.

Many travelled for several hours to attend the demonstration. The *Irish Times* reported on a 75-year-old man who had come from Kilkenny, leaving home at 8 a.m. to walk one and a half miles to catch a bus to Dublin.

During the march, at least three elderly participants had to be taken to hospital after they collapsed. One of them, 72-year-old Patrick Touher, who suffers from heart problems, collapsed after giving a speech attacking the government.

The 2014 budget contained spending cuts and tax hikes totalling €2.5 billion and comes after more than €30 billion in austerity measures since 2008. The budget abolished the telephone allowance and bereavement grant for pensioners, as well as withdrawing free medical cards from 35,000 people over 70. A reduction in the tax allowance on health insurance and an increase in the pension levy will have the effect of further driving down the present meagre living standards of elderly people and forcing thousands of pensioners into poverty.

The cutting of the telephone allowance, which

provided around €10 per month to help older people with bill costs, is especially cruel for those living in remote areas. As Kay Stack from County Kerry told the *Irish Times*, "This Government forces my children to leave because there are no jobs here. They're in London and New York, and now they [the Government] are taking away my only means of communicating with them. I feel devastated."

According to Eamon Timmins of Age Ireland, one of the organisers of the protest, older people living alone and the housebound will suffer greatly. Prescription charges for Medical Card holders have increased from €1.50 to €2.50 per item in the last two years. Changes to income limits for the Over-70s Medical Card, which provided free health care to card holders, will see the loss of another 35,000 cards. In exchange, those who lose their card will have it replaced with one that only grants them a free visit to a GP. This is on top of a property tax and water charges already introduced.

The elimination of the bereavement grant provoked particular outrage. The scheme awarded up to €800 to relatives to help with funeral costs.

"I already have to choose between paying a bill and buying less food.... It's impossible," said Bernard Keane, who held up a placard saying, "People not banks."

"They're all in it together, and those of us who have worked all our lives thinking we could spend some of our later years with some dignity have been left to live on a pittance. Now the whole system seems to be falling round our heads," said Maire O'Donnell, who is 78.

Like every other section of the population, the elderly have suffered as the crisis has deepened. A recent survey by Ireland's Central Statistics Organisation showed that one in ten older people were living in poverty, and that the incomes of pensioners had fallen 5 percent since the onset of the crisis. Since these figures

only covered the period until 2011, the reality is certainly much worse.

Despite the fact that the Fine Gael/Labour government faces increasing opposition to its austerity programme, it has been able to get away with these savage cuts due to the full cooperation of the trade unions and the political establishment.

Although the largest union, SIPTU (Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union), issued a token call for “support” for the pensioners’ march, it took no action to back this up.

The Labour Party leader Eamonn Gilmore has vigorously supported the cuts, declaring last week that he stood by all of the measures in the latest budget. He later insisted that Minister for Health James Reilly, who introduced €666 million in health cuts in the 2014 spending plan, was “doing a very good job reforming the Department of Health.”

Riley’s “reforms” have resulted in chaos in the health system. The latest figures show that nearly 50,000 are on waiting lists for operations, and 300,000 are waiting to see a GP. Even with the cuts already made, figures released this week claimed that the health service would register a deficit of €105 million at the end of the year, which will provoke calls for yet more cuts.

The health care situation for pensioners is set to worsen. According to calculations carried out after the budget was unveiled earlier this month, the government’s decision to remove support for health insurance could see elderly people facing premium hikes of €450 per person when they renew next year.

Pensioners have also been hit hard by rising energy prices, coupled with the cuts made to fuel allowance as part of the government’s austerity drive. The tragic consequences of such policies have been shown in a number of deaths among elderly people unable to heat their homes, especially during the winter months.



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