

# Irish government creates police unit to target social welfare claimants

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Joan Burton, minister for social protection in the Fine Gael/Labour coalition government is to involve the Gardai (the Irish police force) in hounding the poorest and most vulnerable sections of the population off social welfare payments. Her aim is to create a new special unit of police that will intensify pressure on the jobless.

The move is part of the on-going austerity drive by the ruling elite, which has seen spending cut by more than one fifth of economic output over the past five years. It aims to slash the social spending bill as outlined in the 2014 budget, which cut spending by €2.5 billion.

A long-time Labour Party member, Burton exemplifies its collaboration in the ruling elite's assault on the social position of working people. A report last month by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) revealed that Ireland has the fifth highest level of unemployed in a survey of 34 countries.

The result of the huge transfer of wealth from the working class to the super-rich is revealed in the fact that now half of Ireland's population receives some type of welfare payment, while recent figures show one in five children go to school hungry and almost three quarters of a million people are forced to live in poverty. Last October budget cuts of €32 million were introduced by Burton which reduced by €100 the jobseekers rate to those aged up to 24, and by €144 those 25-year or older.

This time the government hopes to tighten the noose even further by setting up a special squad of 20 gardai to seek out where cuts can be made to welfare payments. Though the Department of Social Welfare has already been using its own Special Investigation Unit to cut people off social welfare and closely

working with the Revenue Commissioners, the new police unit will act as social welfare officers with the power to arrest.

Attacks on social welfare claimants have sought to demonise immigrants in particular, with Operation Airside launched in 2012 aimed specifically at tackling so-called welfare tourism. Under this programme, social welfare officers were allowed to question people travelling via ports and airports.

According to the Department of Social Welfare, the new police unit will be involved mainly in "intelligence gathering." This is a reference to the continuing efforts of the department to entice people to inform on others who may be in receipt of overpayments as overall poverty increases. This would include checkpoints on roads leading to estates deemed to be suspect areas. The unit will operate across the country, in Dublin, Dundalk, Donegal, Monaghan, Longford, Galway, Cork, Limerick, Navan, and Sligo. Gardai will also collaborate with a number of state agencies, including Revenue, the taxi regulator and the national employment rights authority.

The intensification of state involvement in all areas of people's lives is a direct consequence of the need for the Irish bourgeoisie to defend their wealth in a situation where the vast majority of working people in Ireland have seen their living standards decimated. It is a pattern replicated across Europe, with the ruling elite in a number of countries turning to increasingly authoritarian methods to enforce its dictates.

The planned involvement of the state security forces in the Department of Social Welfare comes in the wake of revelations that the Gardai were involved in a secret surveillance programme for the past 30 years, which involved the bugging of prisons and Garda stations.

With the cooperation of the unions, the state has also

targeted the right to strike by sections of workers who have dared to challenge the assault on pension rights. In March the High Court issued a judgement banning a four-hour strike by the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU) to protest at the erosion of pension rights which was scheduled at Dublin, Cork and Shannon Airports. There were plans to involve the military if the strike went ahead.

Legislation has also received a second reading in the Senate (upper house of the Irish parliament) that would ban strikes in essential services such as water, electricity and health to be enforced with the threat of huge fines and prison terms. Feargal Quinn, the senator who initially proposed the law, explicitly stated that he had modelled his plan on Greece, where martial law has been used to break strikes.

As the Irish state moves to use the law against those who are jobless and those in regular employment, inequality continues to grow. Early this year a survey of income and living conditions was published by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) which outlined that social welfare payments are the only thing keeping a huge number of people out of poverty. The percentage “at risk of poverty” was given at 16 percent but the CSO figures show that without social welfare payments 50.7 percent would be at risk of poverty.

Consistent poverty was found to be most severe among the unemployed (19.2 percent); people unable to work due to illness or disability (17.6 percent) and one-parent families. Half of those living in below-average private rented accommodation were close to poverty levels. By cutting and capping the rent allowance that tenants received the government has intensified the despair which homelessness has brought to thousands of families.

Much of the Fine Gael/Labour government’s claims on an economic recovery in the lead up to the European and local elections on 22 May centres around a drop in unemployment figures from 11.9 percent in February to 11.8 percent in March. The main age group in which a decrease in employment was recorded was 25 to 35 year olds.

A large portion of the one percent decrease, however, is a direct result of Internship and JobBridge schemes which force young people to work for as little as 50 euro a week. There are now 11,500 companies participating in JobBridge. Since its introduction two

years ago, 1,200 unemployed people had benefits cut for failing to participate.

Martin Murphy, chairman of JobBridge and managing director of Hewlett Packard Ireland admitted in January this year that 40 companies had already been expelled from the scheme for abuse and exploitation. Some months ago there were protests in Dublin and Cork by students highlighting the fact that the JobBridge scheme had been allowing companies to advertise positions for candidates with a “minimum” of a PhD degree.

The discredited Irish Labour Party, now running at less than 6 percent in the polls, has participated in overseeing a huge transfer of wealth from the great majority of the population to the very rich. Last year the richest 300 of the country’s billionaires and multi-millionaires saw their wealth grow by almost 6.3 percent, or €3.9 billion.



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