

Protests mount against water charges in Ireland

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Tens of thousands marched in Dublin Wednesday, against the plans of the Fine Gael-Labour Party coalition to introduce water charges.

Missiles were thrown at police on Kildare Street, the site of one of many barriers in the city centre manned by riot police designed to contain a protest involving up to 100,000 people.

The government unveiled plans in early October to introduce user fees for the use of water across the country. It was a measure agreed by Dublin as part of the bailout programme concluded with the troika of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), European Union (EU) and European Central Bank (ECB) in 2010. Although the bailout programme formally came to an end last year, troika representatives still visit Dublin twice annually for oversight missions.

The initial plans proposed to charge families up to €600 annually. The announcement met with broad public hostility. On October 11 and again on November 1, tens of thousands took to the streets in Dublin and other cities to protest. Two weeks later, on November 15, Tanaiste (deputy Prime Minister) Joan Burton was detained for more than two hours by an angry crowd of around 800 as she attended an event in a Dublin suburb.

The political elite responded furiously to the protests, denouncing them as violent and threatening. One backbench Fine Gael MP compared protesters to supporters of the extremist Islamist group Islamic State, before retracting the remark in the face of widespread outrage.

In a bid to placate public hostility, environment minister Alan Kelly presented a new charging plan in mid-November with reduced fees. However, the plan will still see a family paying €260 annually and a single person €160, and these prices will only stay fixed for four years. This plan could ultimately turn out to be

unviable if the EU's statistics agency Eurostat deems that it will not raise enough money to finance Irish Water. As a utility, Irish Water must raise at least 40 percent of its revenue from non-government sources.

Protesters fear the proposal is part of a drive to entirely privatise water provision, which is supplied in Ireland by its 32 local authorities. More fundamentally, the protests have been provoked by the sustained drive to make working people pay for the economic crisis, which began with the virtual collapse of Ireland's banking system in 2008.

Since the previous Fianna Fail-led government organised a multi-billion bailout of the country's bankrupt financial institutions, every major party has backed devastating austerity measures resulting in thousands of job losses in both the public and private sectors, wage drops of 20 percent and more, billions in budget cuts for essential services, and tax increases. While politicians now talk of recovery, the latest figures show that over the past three months alone, average annual earnings are down by €700.

The discrediting of all of the major political parties is fuelling concerns within the ruling elite over the protests. Fine Gael, Fianna Fail and Labour, the three dominant parties, now command less than 50 percent of public support. The greatest drop is for the current government. Having received 36 percent of the vote in 2011, Fine Gael now enjoys backing from just 22 percent of the electorate, while Labour has tumbled from 19 percent to 8 percent.

Sinn Féin now obtains around 20 percent of the vote, meaning that around 30 percent give their backing to "independents"—smaller parties or local politicians who usually were former members of the major parties.

The official leadership of the protest movement is doing all it can to divert the opposition back into

official channels. Right2Water, a campaign group with branches in almost every part of the country, is led by five trade unions: Unite, the Commercial and Public Services Union, Communications Workers Union, the Plasterers Union of Ireland and Mandate. In a statement on November 22, SIPTU (Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union), Ireland's largest trade union, declared it would join protests but is not formally affiliated to the group.

These are the same trade unions that worked hand-in-glove with successive governments to impose devastating cuts to wages and public services. Two public-sector pay agreements, Croke Park and Haddington Road, have seen the elimination of billions in pay for public-sector workers and the maintenance of a strike ban since 2010. The unions never lifted a finger to organise any genuine opposition to these brutal attacks.

The unions know that mass opposition could quickly escalate beyond their control if it is not confined to applying pressure to Fine Gael and Labour. As a petition circulating by Right2Water states, "We are calling on the Irish government to abolish water charges and respect our human right to water."

A revealing example of the protest leadership's orientation was its invitation to a delegation from the Detroit Water Brigade (DWB) to attend a "national people's assembly" outside parliament following the demonstration yesterday. The DWB worked closely with the Democratic Party and boosted illusions in the ability of the Obama administration to put a stop to the thousands of water shutoffs being implemented in Detroit.

A crucial role in the campaign is being played by the pseudo-left Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party. Both have made no criticism of the official protest leadership and make vague appeals to "people power." The perspective of pressurising the government to change course represents a regurgitation of the politics advanced by the same pseudo-left forces in previous popular protests, such as the demonstrations against the household charge and the property tax. The lack of any political perspective to guide the mass public opposition resulted in the government being able to enforce both deeply unpopular measures.

Workers must break from the trade unions and pseudo-left groups and take up a political struggle

against the entire ruling establishment. The struggle for a workers government committed to a socialist programme is the only way free access to water and all other essentials for a decent standard of living can be secured.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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