

Pseudo-left groups mislead protests against water charges in Ireland

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Since the Fine Gael-Labour coalition government unveiled its plan to impose water charges last October, repeated protests have taken place across Ireland. After six years of a sustained assault on jobs and living standards, the demonstrations are a powerful confirmation of the mounting hostility among the working class to the entire political elite.

Despite the government's attempt to repackage the measures by reducing the rates that individuals and families will have to pay, opposition continues with another major demonstration planned for January 31. The ruling elite has shown its utter contempt for the opponents of the charges, with one Fine Gael parliamentarian even comparing them to terrorists.

The leadership of the anti-water charges movement is attempting to exploit the protests to further its own integration into the structure of official politics.

Right2Water, the umbrella group that has called protests in Dublin and towns and cities across the country, has attracted significant numbers of workers determined to oppose the measures. But it is dominated politically by the very same trade unions that have played such a decisive role in assisting successive governments to enforce one austerity package after another since 2008.

The other key element in the leadership of the protests is various pseudo-left organisations, such as the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party. A prominent role has been assumed by the recently elected parliamentary deputies Paul Murphy and Ruth Coppinger, both SP members who now campaign under the Anti-Austerity Alliance (AAA) formation.

The specific function of these groups is to use socialist rhetoric to deceive workers while keeping them tied to the bankrupt perspective of parliamentary protest and trade union militancy.

In virtually every article published by the SWP and SP on the water charges, they use the formulation "people power" to describe the movement. According to their argument, the protesters will be able to defeat water charges and bring down the government with a militant non-payment campaign when bills are due in April.

Irish workers have already experienced the bitter consequences of such a policy. The SP advocated an identical approach when the government introduced the €100 household charge in early 2012. The promise of a mass non-payment campaign enabled a broad protest movement to be demobilised. When workers were left isolated with no political lead, they gradually paid up to avoid facing sanctions from the state. The government felt emboldened a year later to bring forward a full-blown property tax that charges some up to €1,000 per year.

The "people power" formulation is intended to conceal the class forces that are involved and leave the way open for alliances with bourgeois politicians and the trade unions. Murphy made clear, when speaking at the last major protest on December 10, that this is what the pseudo-left is striving for, declaring, "Let us use the methods we have learned to build a new political movement in this country for the 99 percent, for those not represented by the sinister fringe in the government. This movement is made up of many individuals and campaign groups across the country. The Anti Austerity Alliance is launching a call for people and groups to come together to build a new force to represent the majority. Let's sit down and discuss democratically the building of an umbrella of anti-austerity, anti-water charge, left candidates to stand in every constituency in the country at the next general election."

The basis for such a formation is clear from the political record of Murphy and his SP colleagues. His reaching out to “lefts” is an effort to build on the working relations developed by Joe Higgins and himself with various “independent” members of parliament since Higgins was elected along with then SP member Clare Daly at the 2011 election. Together with SWP members Richard Boyd-Barrett and Joan Collins, they entered parliament as members of the United Left Alliance (ULA). One of their first moves was to form a “technical group” with several “independents.”

The technical group sent representatives to discuss the austerity measures with officials from the troika—the European Union, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank—earning praise from the media for its contribution to parliament. ULA representatives also backed the candidature for Irish President of David Norris, who later advocated legislation banning strikes by workers in essential industries.

The ULA took a serious hit when Mick Wallace, one of the independent deputies who had been courted as a left and radical, was revealed to have avoided paying millions of euros in taxes and benefits to the workforce at a business he owned. The ULA fractured amid bitter recriminations shortly after, with Clare Daley siding so closely with Wallace that the SP was very reluctantly and belatedly forced to take its distance from her.

Both factions then decried the ULA’s failure to “reach out” to broader layers—an indication that opportunist political alliances were still on the cards.

Murphy’s revival of the demand for a broad “left” electoral vehicle makes clear that, for him, it was the inability of the ULA to go far enough in integrating the SP and SWP into bourgeois politics that was its primary failure. A new party would be the basis for the pseudo-left to bring in several “independents” as members, most of whom have long careers in the establishment parties.

The call for a new party was supported in an SWP statement issued at the beginning of the year. It declared of the anti-water charges movement, “The key to this success has been the power of protest and the unified nature of the campaign. It has brought together parties of the Left, Left Independents and five fighting trade unions representing many tens of thousands of supporters, members and workers.”

Coppinger joined in the efforts to give the unions a clean bill of health. Blaming a lack of protest in the first years of the austerity drive on the workers themselves, she wrote in a December article, “[A]usterity was imposed without the same level of protest as took place in other countries. Working class people were reeling from the shock of the recession and, of course, given no lead by the union leadership.”

This pose of criticising the unions is fraudulent. The problem wasn’t that workers were too shocked to resist, or that the unions offered no lead, but that the bureaucracy actively worked to undermine every attempt at resistance. They have imposed a strike ban in the public sector, which began in 2010. This was part of a deal struck between the bureaucracy and the government to slash billions in wages and benefits. At every step, the unions worked to suppress opposition to these attacks among their members.

Strikes and protests in several sectors of the economy were sold out and betrayed by the unions, including at Aer Lingus, Vita Cortex, and ESB. The backing being provided now to Right2Water by the unions is a desperate effort to maintain their control over mounting opposition within the working class.

A decisive political break with these forces is an essential precondition for the political struggle against the entire establishment that is required, along with the capitalist system they defend. The struggle against water charges must be combined with renewed opposition to the social assault carried out in Ireland since 2008, through the turn to a socialist and internationalist programme.



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