

Irish police clamp down on water charge protesters

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25 February 2015

Five anti-water-charge protesters have been jailed for contempt of court in Ireland, following a crackdown by the Garda (police) and the state against any effective protest against the hated water charges.

Since Dublin's Fine Gael/Labour Party government imposed water charges as part of the multi-billion-euro bailout programme concluded with the International Monetary Fund, European Union and European Central Bank in 2010, there has been widespread opposition from working people who correctly see the charge as yet another measure to make them pay for the economic crisis and the collapse of the banks.

On February 19 the High Court imposed a sentence of 28 days on three anti-water-charge protesters for failing to maintain a 20-metre distance from water meters when they were being installed in housing estates. Two other protesters, who have since been refusing food (Derek Byrne from Donaghmede and Paul Moore from Kilbarrack), were jailed for 56 days.

The frustration and anger of many local communities has resulted in numerous water meter installations being blocked by residents, who have physically obstructed work being carried out by contract firms on behalf of Irish Water. Irish Water was the body set up by the government to collect the water charges from the population.

Following the arrests, more than 10,000 people, led by the families of the jailed anti-water-charge protesters, marched to Mountjoy jail in Dublin calling for the release of the protesters.

The jailing of the protesters followed a general crackdown by the Garda and the courts on the right to protest. Twenty-three people were apprehended in dawn raids by the Garda recently and later released without charge. On February 9, Socialist Party TD (Teachta Dála—member of parliament) Paul Murphy,

along with three other members of the Anti-Austerity Alliance, were arrested in the early hours of the morning and detained under section four of the Criminal Justice Act 1984. This act permits the detention of people for up to 24 hours for a wide range of offences against the state.

According to the Garda, the arrests were in response to a protest last November in the predominately working class estate of Jobstown, near Tallaght, Dublin in which angry protesters spontaneously surrounded the car of Tanaiste (Deputy Prime Minister) Joan Burton. Detaining her for over three hours, the protesters shouted defiant slogans against the introduction of water charges and Burton's slashing of lone parents' payments. Social welfare cuts to be introduced in July this year will see 6,400 lone parents lose up to €36.50 per week; 4,500 will lose up to €57; and 800, who are also carers, will suffer €86 per week in cuts to payments.

Derek Byrne, one of the five protesters jailed for contempt in the latest crackdown, was also involved in a protest at the end of January. This received huge media coverage, as footage emerged in which he was heard calling President Michael D. Higgins a "midget parasite" as Higgins' car left a visit to a Dublin school. In the footage, Higgins is also repeatedly described as a "sellout" and "traitor". The media and the establishment went into overdrive to condemn all those involved in the protest, pointing out the sanctity of the presidency and the necessity to keep the position of president "above politics." Labour TD John Lyons described the protest against Higgins as "thuggery." Minister for Health Leo Varadkar even described the protest against Higgins as "an attack on the Constitution."

As the anger and frustration against austerity and the

continuing impoverishment of the majority of the population continue to grow, the pseudo-left Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party's front organisation People Before Profit (PBP) continue to bend over backwards to proclaim their loyalty to capitalism—seeking what many have described as the formation of new party styled on Syriza in Greece.

These groups secured a smooth transition for the establishment at the beginning of the Irish banking crisis by sending representatives to discuss the austerity measures with officials from the troika—the European Union, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund—thus securing a sizeable amount of coverage from the media for their contribution to parliament and policies which differ little from the nationalist Sinn Fein.

Socialist Party TD Joe Higgins now contributes loyally to the inter-party banking inquiry which was set up last December by the government despite the fact that the dogs in the street know it is a farce and that the inquiry has ruled out any criminal procedures against the super-rich who crashed the economy through financial speculation.

As the Socialist Party has been co-opted over the past years by the ruling establishment and its state institutions, it finds itself having to walk a thin line between its radical face of organised protest and its pro-capitalist politics. When responding to the recent arrests, Higgins declared they were a “waste of Garda resources.” Paul Murphy stated, “It's really blatant and disgusting in the context where policing resources are needed for things that make a difference for people.”

Although Murphy condemned the arrests as “political policing,” he made it clear on a TV talk show that protests needed to be confined within “official guidelines” and that protesting against the president was out of line and needed to be strongly condemned. When shown a video of the Michael D. Higgins protest, Murphy was emphatic in saying, “I have condemned it repeatedly. I wasn't there, I don't approve of it, I don't agree with it, I condemned it repeatedly. They were wrong.”

In reference to the blocking of Joan Burton's car in which he was accused of shouting through a megaphone, “Do we let her go if they withdraw the special units,” he went on to say, “The Garda had explicitly asked me to put that question to the crowd.

The Garda wanted to deescalate the situation and they choose to talk to me. I was trying to play a role in having a disciplined protest. If I had orchestrated this protest this would not have happened. I arrive on the scene and what role do I play? I attempt to put a shape on the protest, to put a discipline on the protest.”



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